

Is Christianity a Postmodern Religion?

Professor Colin Gunton

I Preliminaries:

Two questions confront us in approaching this topic: what postmodernism is and what it means to call Christianity a religion. They are bound up together, and neither of the answers is as obvious as it might seem. I shall begin with the former, but want to suggest later that a treatment of the topic also requires some discussion of the latter. Further, there are two focuses through which the question should be viewed, the intellectual, on the one hand, and the social or political on the other. We might gloss these as the question of meaning and truth and the question of power. Combine the two focuses and the two questions, and you have a recipe for a very complicated discussion, complicated in part because both modernity and postmodernity tend to produce answers in which contradictory answers are given.

Something also depends upon distinctions, and I shall begin there. First, we can refer to modernity and postmodernity as eras or modernism and postmodernism as theories. I am mainly concerned in this paper with the latter, the theoretical or ideological, but, because theories can never be isolated from their historical and social setting, will necessarily make some reference to that also. And because, for whatever that is worth, etymologically postmodernism simply means 'after modernism', and is therefore parasitic upon whatever definition we give of that, it is with that that I shall begin.

II Modernity:

We all think that we know what modernity is, but, once we try to define it, the problems begin. If we are speaking about the modern era, some would date modernity to the eighteenth century, even the seventeenth; some would tend to concentrate on the more recent past. Modernism in painting, music, architecture, etc., tends to refer to twentieth century schools, but here I am concerned to trace a more distant rather than a more recent lineage. That is because modernism in the twentieth century expression represents the final flowering - if it is final - of tendencies beginning further back, even into the Middle Ages. The character of recent events becomes clear only if we begin with the time when modern culture began to claim to be 'modern', and to understand by that a particular stance of criticism and rejection of the past, and particularly of the Christian past. One cannot begin to comprehend the modern world's self-understanding without realising that it is at least in part an anti-Christian movement - anti-Christian at least in the sense of being highly dubious about essentials of Christianity such as the place given to dogma, authority and tradition, however variously understood: what we might call the institutional apparatus of Christianity.

Let us begin with in image, perhaps the image of modernity. Although the notion of the world as a machine predates the modern era, it is perhaps the most characteristic of all of the images of modernity. It serves both as a model of the universe and as a focus for action. What is meant by that two-fold characterisation? The meaning of the universe is that it is a great machine; and that generates a particular conception of power: power over people, over ideas and over things. The image of the machine and the attempt to control our environment, political and natural alike, go hand in hand.

First, it is a way of understanding the universe. As a model of the universe it understands the working of the world by analogy with a human contrivance - something working according to a particular logic. A machine works by internal logic: the relations of its parts to one another determine what it is and what it does. But, immediately, the claim needs qualification by the drawing of a distinction. As a method of approach to understanding the world, the image of the machine can work in one of two ways. It can work, first, as a way of approaching the world -

heuristically, as the philosophers say. That was the case with Newton and other early modern scientists. As such, it is an invitation to examine those aspects of the universe which are believed to be machine-like in order to lay bare their inner logic - what makes them tick, to use another aspect of the metaphor. But, second, and this is what came to happen, the model can also work ideologically as a total - or, to use postmodern jargon, totalising - explanation for simply everything. 'Modernism' can in this respect be defined as the movement which used the model of the machine as an ideology with which to encompass the whole of life.

The hope of the most reductionist of modern theorists of science was and is so to understand the universe that all of its parts might be understood as components of a completely described machine. In the early nineteenth century Laplace articulated the notion of the scientific mind which would chart the place and the relations of every particle in the universe, and thus achieve the kind of omniscience formerly attributed only to the deity. An echo of the programme remains in the much quoted last words of Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*.¹ It still lives in the programmes of some modern biological reductionists who sometimes at least appear to suggest that knowledge of genes will eventually give rise to a total knowledge of human being.

However, difficulties arise when the image is turned upon its begetter, Frankenstein-like, and is used also to explain the workings of the human being. *Man the Machine* by LaMettrie (1847) is the title of one of modernity's most typically named books, and as early as the first decades of the nineteenth century Coleridge, responding to even earlier critiques, Blake's for example, saw in this universal philosophy an extreme danger to all properly human values - art, ethics and religion among them, but also, as Polanyi never ceased to point out, science itself as a humane pursuit. The significance of the generalising of mechanism to the whole of human reality is that it gives rise to a paradox, if not a contradiction. On the one hand, as Coleridge held, the machine image reduces all human life to passivity: if we are simply parts of a machine, then any authentically human action and culture is ruled out. On the other hand, however - and this brings us to the second general area - when we come to the idea of the machine as a principle of or motive for action, the opposite tendency results: not passivity in face of a mechanistic universe, but the relentless and ruthless human activity which reduces all of reality to being a resource for human action. This is easily illustrated. As Robert Jenson has recently shown, the project of early modern politics was to apply our model to political theory. The plan was to ground social order in human nature, but a human nature understood in terms of mechanism. The mechanism of social order was based in a natural order understood to have been created by a machine-maker deity. Speaking of Enlightenment America, Jenson comments that 'Laws of political motion derived from analogy to the Newtonian laws of action and reaction pit interest against interest, faction against faction, power-center against power-center, to the good of all. The construction of such a policy was the great goal of those who established America's institutions.'² States are thus machines, as in the famous image of the checks and balances, and something similar underlies Marxist models of the organisation of society, another classic example of the ruthless logic of mechanism.

Here the more recent notion that a house is a 'machine for living in' both illustrates the point, and introduces us to the beginnings of the self-designated movement known as postmodernity. We shall come to that later. But first a summary of the two sides, theoretical and practical, of the machine analogy. There are, as we have seen, two poles to the matter: modernity tended to produce certain characteristic ways of thinking about meaning and truth, on the one hand, and power on the other. Something is meaningful only if it can in some way be fitted to a mechanistic form of understanding; while action is appropriate to the nature of the universe if it reduces things, organises them according to, this particular model of what it is to be. When the two poles are brought together, we can see, if we follow postmodernism's 'hermeneutic of suspicion' that the

¹Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (London: Bantam Press, 1988), p.175. 'If we find the answer to that [a theory of everything], it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason - for then we would know the mind of God.'

²Robert W. Jenson, *Essays in Theology of Culture*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p.59.

theoretical model provides a justification for certain kinds of power relations in relation to both human society and the universe.

This enables us to understand modernity through the eyes of postmodernity. On the one hand, from a viewpoint which wants to be post modern, modernity is seen to have a rigid and reductionist view of meaning and truth. If something is to be true, then it must conform to codes of meaning and truth decided in advance, and that means by the canonical thinkers of modernity, Immanuel Kant in particular. These codes tend to exclude as either untrue or as so meaningless as not even to be true or false anything that does not conform to a model of knowledge determined by the metaphor of mechanism. In sum: we might say that postmodernity's complaint against modernism is that anything, whatever its character, is subjected to the same forcible intellectual method. Modernism is violence. Deconstruction, as a characteristic form of intellectual activity in postmodernism, is that process whereby the hidden claims to power in modernism are exposed. The charge is made that modernism may appear to be an objective way of finding out the truth, but in point of fact is a way of imposing control.

Thus for postmodernism, modernism operates as ideology: as a means of subjecting people and things to the will and interests of others. That leads to an objection to all forms of 'totalising'. Any system of thought or politics which subjects everyone and everything to the same rigid straitjacket is a form of violence. Modernism totalises, for example, in the chief realm from which postmodernity took its starting point, in forcibly imposing the same architectural style - the machine for living in, for working in, for learning in, for playing in - on the landscape and on people wherever and whoever they are. Whatever else we are to make of the architectural theories of the Prince of Wales, he is right about one thing: that modernism architecture makes the mistake of imposing its universal mechanistic forms upon the landscape, rather than building to harmonise with it.

III Postmodernity

As we have seen, modernism took its rise in the mediaeval notion that the world is a machine, a suggestion brought to the centre and generalised by Newton and his successors. By contrast, postmodernism takes its origin almost certainly in architecture, where the movement begins with the desire to be eclectic rather than to impose one style and to borrow, sometimes haphazardly, bits and pieces of styles from all over the place, the leading image perhaps being collage, simply bringing various fragments together. In sum, as it is taken up by other realms of culture, postmodernism is a reaction against the imposition of all 'totalising' narratives and uniform styles, and therefore often takes the form of a criticism of ideology and of power. But just as modernism represents the machine image taken to its ideological conclusion, so it is here with a different metaphor: the idea of a collage without a frame suggests something entirely without constricting limits. Thus, in place of the view that there is only one way to approach the world, to be imposed on everything, the tendency of postmodernism is to say that there is no common feature of thought and of things.

This is not so much a theory of meaning and truth as, at its extremes, a denial that there can be one. It leads to the denial of objective truth and often a collapse into pragmatism: the only test of anything is whether it works. In the philosophy of science the claim is that whereas the mistake was once made of saying that there was only one method, modelled on the aim of Laplace at total (totalising) explanation, now anything goes.³ If a scientist uses a method successfully (whatever that means), then it is right. Simplified though this analysis is, it makes one thing clear: that postmodernism in its extreme form involves the loss of the concept of truth. That is a feature

³For example, Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method, Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge*, (London: Verso, 1978. 1st edition 1975).

of much thought to which the label postmodern is applied. Because of its radical doctrine of the unrelatedness of things to each other and to a whole or universe, it has no way of discovering what claims are true, and in what way. Babel, and not Pentecost, has the last word.

One important feature of this approach is that it leads to revised versions, but versions none the less, of the two contradictory features we have seen to operate in modernism - that before the machine we are both passive, because part of it; and active - because we seek to control it. Postmodernism, too, has its passive side. We are not now the prisoners of the iron logic of the universe, but of the fact that there is no logic to the universe at all. Instead of being the puppets of a machine, we are the playthings of an utterly random and meaningless process. If there is no order at all, then we are but the playthings of an unknown and unknowable universe. The result is that postmodernism is an even more insidiously enslaving ideology than modernism, because it claims not to be an ideology. As is often enough remarked, it contradicts itself by making the universal claim that there can be no universal truths. But this gives it the slipperiness of a position that is beyond argument or critique.⁴

Over against this, there is the active side of postmodernism. Rather than being content with enduring the status of a plaything, much postmodern ideology takes upon itself the mantle of God. Don Cupitt's view is that we make our own religion. The philosopher Edward Craig has brilliantly argued that positions like this in effect say that human action is divine action, because it is that which is the criterion of truth and rightness.⁵ This is the feature which underlies the accusations of relativism and, more seriously, nihilism, which are often laid at the door of postmodernism. If some of the things that are said are true, then it matters not whether I love my neighbour or murder him. We might say, again exaggerating: postmodernism plays Hitler to modernism's Stalin, and there is little to choose between them.

Theologically speaking the case is as follows. For modernism, if there is no God, everything is permitted; for postmodernism, it is the reverse: if everything is permitted, there is no God. The key, I think, is the matter of limits. Modernism, at least in its later form, tends to say that it is the mind which determines and imposes the boundaries of human activities; but postmodernism, by saying that there are no boundaries, is in effect saying the same thing. For restrictive limits and no limits at all are alike forms of disempowerment.

IV Christianity as a Religion

In all of this, Christianity is caught between the nether and upper millstones. On the one hand, according to modernism's critique, it fails to come up to scratch in all kinds of ways. It has two faults which cause its rejection. First, it is false, meaningless or at best has to be radically changed in order to maintain its respectability. This underlies the project known as theological modernism. It was an attempt, now manifestly seen to have failed, to enable Christianity to survive by making it conform to modern canons of meaning and truth. (Here postmodernism can be liberating, because it holds that modernism has failed to conform to its own standards, and so cannot be used as a universal criterion of truth). The second fault according to modernism is that Christianity fails because it is a system of social control which deprives people of their freedom by subjecting them to the control of priests.

On the other hand, postmodernism's view that modernism simply represents a new slavery does not let Christianity off the hook; if anything, the critique is more radical. We can put it like this: modernism replaced one 'metanarrative' with another. It replaced Christianity's overarching story with others - for example, that of Marx - and they have universally proved more oppressive than the religion they seek to replace. Postmodernism for this reason seeks to reject all

⁴It is, we might say, the philosophy of the isosceles bird.

⁵Edward Craig, *The Mind of God and the Works of Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

metanarratives, Christianity's included. The radical challenge of postmodernism is therefore this: metanarratives are not only impossible, because we cannot obtain the view of the whole which we need to produce one; they are also oppressive, because they are methods of social control. Christianity, as a metanarrative, falls subject to the same critique. That is to say: modernism rejects Christianity because it is the wrong system of meaning and of social coherence; postmodernism rejects it because it is a system of meaning at all. But both make a common point: that Christianity fails because it is an oppressive form of social control. The problem we face in the common critique is that there is something in it, and it brings me to the complicating feature, which is some discussion of the nature of Christianity as a religion. Is Christianity a religion, and in what sense?

Two rather different points need to be made if we are to achieve a measure of clarity, partly because it is notorious that 'religion' is virtually impossible to define. The first is that the very notion of religion is an essentially modern one, at least in the senses I shall try to spell out. To use the word 'religion' of anything is to attempt to classify a form of being in the world under a concept that is, to use the jargon, totalising. The idea that there are various religions, and that they all partake of a common character, or aspects of a common character, is a characteristically modern idea. (In the New Testament in so far as a word translatable as 'religion' is used, it tends to refer to the faithful performance of one's Christian responsibilities: 'Religion that is pure and undefiled before our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained before the world', James 1.27; and there are many parallels in the Old Testament, which was for the most part unenthusiastic about the 'religions' it found in the world about it). The expression as it comes to be used in the nineteenth century is thus a modern construct, whose usage owes much to Schleiermacher's attempt, at the very end of the century of enlightenment, to identify an essence of religion in order to defend it against rationalist attacks. While objecting to a reductively rationalist understanding of religion, as he had received it from Kant above all, he employed what is essentially a modern reductive tool with which to defend it. Religion is the universal under which particular social or communal forms of being are to be classified. His defence incorporated an attempt to treat religions comparatively, scarcely surprisingly with Christianity at the head of a trio of monotheistic religions, themselves held to be superior to all other religious enterprises.

The outcome was first an increasing tendency to call into question the comparative aspects of Schleiermacher's judgement, and, then, a more recent tendency, in what is falsely called pluralism, to argue that all religions are versions of the essentially same underlying human quest for the real, or whatever. Thus it is with John Hick's *An Interpretation of Religion*.⁶ This is a quintessentially modernist project, in that it involves doing with religions what Kant had done with knowledge: to find a framework, imposed by the mind, in the light of which all religions are claimed to be essentially the same. Against this, any assertion of the unique particularity of Christianity, or any other socially embodied system of belief and behaviour, is anti- or post-modern. In that sense, Karl Barth's attack on the idea of religion - not other religions, it must be noted, but the idea of Christianity as a religion - is the first piece of postmodernist theology. In particular, it asserts the distinctive features of Christian belief - that it is more gospel or faith than religion - against the generalising or 'totalising' view that Christianity is simply to be comprehended as one species, however wonderful, of the genus religion. It is also postmodern in other respects: at the epistemological level it rejects the Kantian view that there is only one form of knowledge. In a paper essential to understanding the kind of theologian that he is, Barth shows that theological method must distinguish itself from both realism and idealism as the Enlightenment tradition understands them, even though aspects of both will be taken up into theology. In terms of my earlier claim that modernism is passive and active in different respects, Barth rejects modernist forms of epistemology: the realism - 'Fate' - which simply makes of

⁶John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion, Human Responses to the Transcendent* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

knowledge the response to impersonal determinism, and the idealism which actively imposes its structure of knowing upon the universe.⁷

Barth's anti-modernist programme, designed to enable Christian theology to stand on its own feet as the science of faith rather than a species of 'religion', shows that in the respect in which it rejects the procrusteanism of the modern movement, postmodernism in general is a great liberation for Christian - and other - theology, and for one reason in particular. The Enlightenment's claims for the omnipotence of reason - 'scientific' reason in the restricted sense we have met - was directed in part against the dogmatic claims of Christianity. As we have seen, modernism is historically an anti-Christian creed, and therefore any assistance in overcoming it is to be welcomed. But: timeo Danaos et dona ferentes.⁸ We might gloss this: postmodernism may help us to undermine one foe, but it is, whatever it may pretend, another philosophy - Athens, rather than Jerusalem. Postmodernism is a poisoned chalice as we shall see.

The second point is that in its origins Christianity was not a religion, at least not in the sense in which that was understood in the ancient world. It was a form of 'atheism' because it subverted the religions of the Roman empire. It denied both their truth and their power. This was not only because it was new and made universal claims. (Judaism was mostly tolerated, because on the whole it did not). It was persecuted because it denied both the truth and the social function of the official religions of its day. Roman religion was syncretistic; if someone found a new god or cult, it was simply added to the list. (It was, in that respect, 'postmodern!'). That is to say, most religions were simply compatible with one another, and did not make competing claims. Christianity did. Like Judaism, it refused to worship any God but the God of the Bible; unlike Judaism, it called on all people to worship that God instead of their own. If the Bible is true, then the Roman gods do not exist. Second, this claim for universal truth clashed with the social function of Roman religion which was, in the modern jargon, an agency of social control. Particularly in its cult of the emperor, religion was the means by which the empire was held together. Christianity threatened that, and so threatened the cohesion of the empire. It was therefore not a religion in the proper sense.

But it became one in the fourth century AD, when the emperor Constantine acknowledged its victory over the religions and used it to replace them. Whether this was right, wrong or inevitable, is not here to the point, which is that from then on - until the modern era, and even well into it - Christianity served as an official agent of social cohesion. It was the religious arm of society, which became Christendom: the era and the society ordered by this religion, as India, so it came to be thought, was ordered by Hinduism, though the idea of Hinduism as a unified religion is an oversimplification, as my colleague Friedhelm Hardy has shown.⁹ As we look back, especially in an old-fogeyish mood, we might think that Christendom was not in all ways a bad thing: it built beautiful cathedrals and encouraged the composition of beautiful music, which have now been succeeded or replaced by hideous temples of mammon and cacophonous beats emanating from the open windows of flashy motor vehicles.¹⁰ But that was not modernity's view, which was that Christendom was slavery, and was to be replaced by the new messianic era of freedom.

IV

⁷Karl Barth, 'Fate and Idea in Theology', *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth*, edited by H.M. Rumscheidt (Allison Park, Pennsylvania: Pickwick Publications, 1986), pp. 25-61

⁸'I fear the Greeks even when they are bringing gifts.'

⁹Hinduism cannot begin to be understood by the blanket term which is often used of it. There are varieties of Indian religion, classified under this head, which make absolute claims for themselves in contrast to the other forms. I refer to a paper given by Professor Hardy at a recent conference at King's College, London.

¹⁰There are, of course, many things to be said on the other side. But the point is still worth making.

As I hope will by now have become clear, I believe that the Christian response to both of the movements, at least in their extremes, must be: a plague on both your houses. The reasons for this are as follows:

(1) Twentieth century theology really begins with Karl Barth's attack on religion. By this, he did not, to repeat, mean other religions, but Christianity's religiousness. Whatever else he was wrong about, Barth is right to say that the primary significance of Christianity is gospel, good news: a story of divine action for the salvation of the world in Jesus Christ. It is not a philosophy or ideology, though it has philosophical features. As the angel in the book of Revelation proclaims: this is an eternal gospel (Rev. 14:6). It is eternal in the sense that it cannot be restricted within the terms of any school of thought, era or trend, whether modern, postmodern or anything else.

That is not to deny that at another level Christianity is of course a religion. It has many of the features that sociologists and other observers of the human scene describe as religious: cults, doctrines, ethics and all the rest of the dismal list that claims to explain something. No enterprise as successful as modernity has been can be entirely wrong. The scientific and conceptual tools which the modern age has forged in order to make the world understandable cannot be rejected out of hand. To describe Christianity along with Islam and Hinduism as religion is not entirely false, though to think that by doing so we have understood them is. And there is the rub. The essence of Christianity - if I may use that dangerous and modern term - is that it is the proclamation of divine action towards the world in the person of Jesus Christ. To be true to itself, therefore, it must be, in Robert Jenson's expression, a religion against itself - a religion that is not content with being such, but always listens for the word of God that transforms its religious ways into the Kingdom of his Son.¹¹ But, as that same writer said some thirty years afterwards, it retains a metanarrative. Metanarratives are not impossible but inevitable. 'We humans will interpret our world one way or another, that is, we will do metaphysics. If we are believers, we will interpret the world by the gospel; theology always has a metaphysical aspect.'¹² That is, it is part both of being human and of being Christian that we try to make sense of our world by interpreting its meaning as a whole. Christians - and some others - use the word 'God' precisely in order to do this. And that word is the key. When we use it, we not only seek to understand the universe, but we also recognise our limits. We may totalise, but we know that our knowledge has limits. We know in part, because we are only human and because all that we do is subject to God's final judgement. The mistake of modernism is to anticipate that judgement: to claim to know too much. But it does not follow, with postmodernism, that we know nothing of this kind at all.

What does this mean for Christianity? We must say that the modernist assault on the tradition subverted it by attempting to turn it into something that it is not; postmodernism liberates from that by asserting the right of the particular. But by denying its claims to be true and universal it refuses to allow it to be what it is. By making the particular no more than part of an open collage it breaks its *constitutive* relation to the other - including the past. It is as hostile to truth mediated by teaching and tradition as modernism, and this is a symptom of the self-enclosure that is so characteristic of the modern world. But that does raise a question we must face. Are metanarratives necessarily oppressive? That depends upon what they are. Anthony Thiselton has argued at length that ours is not an oppressive but a liberating story.¹³ I shall content myself with two points. The God of the gospel meets us in the human figure of his Son become flesh for us; and sends the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, whose function is to enable us, through the risen and ascended Christ, to be truly that which we were created to be. The calling of the church is to live by that, and abandon any lingering hopes she may still have of social control.

¹¹Robert Jenson, *A Religion against Itself*, (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox, 1967).

¹²Robert W. Jenson, *What difference Post-Modernity makes for the church*, *Trinity Seminary Review*, 18 (1997) 83-92.

¹³Anthony Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self. On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995).

(2) More generally, Christianity cannot be beholden to modernism, not merely for the reasons that modernism is anti-Christian, but because, as I have already suggested, modernism claims to know too much. The heart of Barth's rejection of the idea of religion as he received it from the nineteenth century was that it too easily imagines that it has a comfortable hold on the truth of God: that *its* truth and institutional form are identical with God's truth. Because, however, the gospel is eternal, it can always be contrasted with any form that it takes in history; it can always be asked whether the religious form of the Christian religion is, in fact, truly Christian. It is often held against Barth that he believes that only Christianity is true. That is wrong. He does not, actually, much like Christianity - the religion - because too often it fails to be true to the gospel that is Jesus Christ as divine action. He believes that Jesus Christ is the truth, and therefore the measure of all other truth, but that is not the same thing. We do not have hold of the truth of Christ - the gospel is eternal and we are temporal, as Kierkegaard never tires of reminding us - and can only make more or less successful attempts to tell its truth and embody it in our churches. Yet it does not follow that there is no truth; rather that our attempts at truth and religion only more or less successfully encompass it.¹⁴ Here, postmodernism can be welcomed as liberator, but guardedly, lest the devil that is driven out be replaced by seven worse ones.

(3) Christianity cannot be beholden to postmodernism, because it has to be conceded that in certain respects modernity, if not modernism, is right - and, indeed, to be preferred to postmodernism. The best forms of Enlightenment reason believe in universal truth and the rationality of the world. It may have made the mistake of confusing its reason and its judgements with those of God - and that is some fault - but at least it did not wish that everything should melt into nihilism and anarchy. God is a God of peace and order, and there will be not peace in postmodern relativism, but only the war of each against all, in a kind of universal Thatcherism.

At the heart of the whole dispute of the 'isms' is the doctrine of creation. Modernism thinks that it can replace the creating act of God with its own creation by reason and power, though it cannot; postmodernism similarly sometimes suggests that the only meaning is that which we impose ourselves on an essentially chaotic world. But only God creates out of nothing. To act as if there are no created limits, or that we create them ourselves, leads to a sickness that is similarly diagnosed in two places. Some Greek tragedies show the consequences of human failure to remain within the limits firmly set by the gods, and above them relentless fate.¹⁵ The Bible is here more compassionate. It does indeed show that lack of limits is a form of slavery, because that which is created, by attempting to become what is not, subverts its own true being. To arrogate to ourselves the functions of deity is to enter a slavery: to those cosmic forces the New Testament calls the principalities and powers. This is because to attempt to be what one is not is fundamentally alienating. Yet the compassion is to be seen in the fact that God does not beat our heads against our limits; rather, the Son of God endures the consequences of our 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' - principalities and powers alike - in order to liberate us to be human within our limits, which is one of the things that being human means.

V Yes and No

¹⁴In that respect, we have to concede that there is much that is right in the modern critique of Christianity, which had often taken institutional form which was not always appropriate to its nature. Centrally, of course, we can understand the modern world as accusing Christians of a hypocrisy that, while it claimed to promote freedom, in fact imposed a form of slavery. There are elements of truth in the charge, but it seems to me that it is time the tables were turned. If some forms of Christianity enslave, how much more is it the case with their proposed replacements.

¹⁵Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, translation edited by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957-1975), volume 2/2, p.555.

So, is Christianity a postmodern religion? (1) Is it a religion? Yes and no. Yes, because it cannot be denied that sociologically it takes a similar form to many other of the phenomena called religion, even though it may be impossible to define what religion is. No, because, as eternal gospel, it transcends all philosophies, systems and anti-systems. (2) Is it postmodern? Yes and no. Yes, because like postmodernism it stands in opposition to modernism's overweening arrogance. Moreover, its proclamation of an eternal gospel on the basis of the historical *particularity* of the incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ flies in the face of modernism's characteristic philosophies. No, because it believes in the God of Jesus Christ as the source of all being, meaning and truth, and so cannot see the world, even the fallen world, as a mere collage. Even in its fallenness, the world is the realm of the ruler of the kings of the earth, and therefore rightly called a universe.

Ecological Ecclesia and the Grounding of the Future

Professor Mary Grey

Let me begin with sketching a dilemma - and in so doing explaining my title! None of us here this evening can be unaware of the environmental crisis. I will not test your patience by reciting the statistics of how many species are dying daily and at what rate, how many acres of rain-forest are lost every minute, what our daily consumption of water does to the desertification of land. I take it you know these things. The dilemma arises because on the one hand, from whatever the motive, political parties of all persuasions now take on board environmental issues, industries must be seen to have some regulating mechanisms in place - however inadequate - supermarkets must declare the ingredients of every food product. On a domestic level there is a growing number of aware and conscientised people who do re-cycle, cut down on car usage, refuse CFC hostile products and seek to promote organic produce. So, a small but growing green consciousness, one could say. My question is directed to the Churches and to theology itself. Unfortunately, even if Jewish and Christian theology does begin with an idyll in a Garden there is no convincing evidence that green consciousness attracts more than a passive acquiescent nod from theologians. One cannot be against creation: one must be for the earth - but we don't think environmental thinking is what theologians should spend time on! It was actually a great achievement at the European Ecumenical assembly at Graz in Austria two weeks ago that in the final document there was acknowledgement of the problem:

Ruthless exploitation of non-renewable resources, pollution of the environment and disruption of the eco-systems are now causing immense damage and threaten the well-being of future generations and the whole of creation.

(Graz, Final Message).

Further, in the challenges to the Churches, as part of the commitment to reconciliation the document urges political decision-makers

to take the necessary measures to reverse the present trend towards ecological destruction and depletion of the world's resources and to create the conditions allowing a sustainable life for all creation. (Final Message, III.8)

This is indeed a step forward. When I recall the *Letter to the Churches* following the Rio Assembly in 1992 (as part of the Earth Summit), their awareness of the ecclesial responsibility was just beginning:

We dare not deny our rôle as Churches in the crisis which now overwhelms us. We have not spoken the prophetic word ourselves. Indeed, we did not even hear it when it was spoken by others of late, including a number of scientists. Much less did we hear the cries of indigenous peoples who have told us for centuries that modernity would foul its own nest and even devour its own children. We need to mourn and repent ... We plead for forgiveness and pray for a profound change of heart ...¹⁶

This initial step towards repentance which was expressed at the Rio Assembly did take a small step forward at Graz in being put within the context of reconciliation; so I do not underestimate

¹⁶*Letter to the Churches*, (Geneva, WCC, 1992), p.10.

this, nor the energy and dynamism of the environmental pressure groups at Graz, nor the efforts here in Britain of the Life-Style Movements, Christian Ecology Link and Evangelical Environmental Concern and other groups. My concern is with theology itself and with the theologians. As I said, Green theology, Creation theology and spirituality are still only marginally accepted as a legitimate part of what one might call real theology. Moreover, they are usually successfully sidelined by being associated with ecofeminism, animal rights, Gaia and various pagan goddesses, with people who live up trees in Newbury or down tunnels in Manchester, or who hug trees in India; all examples, it is argued, or trendy currents, symptomatic of a heady mix of postmodern consciousness, pick and mix consumerism, self-indulgence and a rejection of mainstream Christianity. I exaggerate - but not much.

What I want to tackle in this paper this evening is the inertia and apathy of theology which prevents effective action for the earth; I argue that it is not statistics which change people. When the levels of compassion and our sensitivities, our caring capacity are all touched, this is when transformation occurs. But, secondly, this is the core of what the gathering together we call Church is all about in its ministry of caring or diakonia. I will argue that in "*ecological ecclesia*" - and I use the Latin word to stimulate us to think in a new way, not because I am Roman Catholic! - we ground the idea of Church in such a way as to become a community conscious of dwelling on this earth, taking responsibility for the bio-region, integrating sustainable living into the heart of a vibrant, re-imaged Christian identity.

For too long has preoccupation with individual salvation functioned to block wider responsibilities. As theologian Dieter Hessel argues:

The Church is still preoccupied with individual salvation that ignores earth community; it has become indifferent to widespread use of disruptive technologies that treat nature mechanistically; and it remains acculturated to market economies that promise "progress" even as they disregard earth-keeping.¹⁷

Becoming community in any real sense must begin with where we dwell. And we dwell on planet earth, in city, village, desert, mountain, forest and lake-side. We are in fact a small part of a very ancient story, earth-story. And a late-comer at that - the last five minutes, as some cosmologists would say. All of us dwell in bio-regions with specific giftedness and vulnerability to human need and greed. We do not just depend on the earth - we are the earth, breathing in her air, treading her soil lightly or heavily, depending on what demands we make on the bio-region. As ecofeminist thinker Susan Griffin put it:

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.¹⁸

Such is our heritage of philosophical dualisms here in the West - mind/rationality/logic overagainst body/emotion/intuition, man overagainst woman, humanity overagainst the animal and plant world - that we are reluctant to admit our dependence on and vulnerability to nature's graciousness and her tragic aspects. Such is the impact, too, of the spiritualising, body-denying strand of Western Christianity, that the spirit is identified with the real person, and the true home

¹⁷Dieter Hessel ed., *After Nature's Revolt: Eco-justice and Theology*, (Fortress, Minneapolis 1992), Introduction, p.13.

¹⁸Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: the Roaring Inside her*, (New York, Harper and Row), 1978.

for the spirit is deemed to be beyond the earth, in Paradise, the Garden re-created for us in the New Jerusalem. This makes the earth, in the last resort, expendable. As eco-theologian, Catherine Keller has written, as if to the spoilt child, who takes no care of his toys: "Waste. Spend. It matters not. Destroy this earth: Daddy will give you a new one!"¹⁹ Small wonder that we need to re-think eschatology in a way which includes the survival and well-being of the planet. In other words, as *the grounding of the future*, (which explains my title), right here and not in a disembodied universe - let alone on Mars.

In fact, the current fascination with the manufacture of artificial food, the cloning of animals - and even of human beings - and the ability of the computer to assume numerous human functions, are all fostering the illusion that the greater the cultural advance the further *Homo sapiens* moves from being nature-dependent. Secondly, that nature has been seen as the abode of pagan deities, animistic sprites, the place of the idolatry of trees, Druidic rites, devil worship seems to function as a block to increase this dualism. "Nature is to culture as woman is to man"²⁰ has been a familiar saying and it is undeniable that nature has been associated with female sexuality by certain negative strands of the Christian tradition, equally damaging to both. Thirdly, our thinking is still *anthropocentric*-focused - on human beings - if not *anthroposolist* - focused exclusively on human beings. This way of thinking keeps "man" at the top of the Ladder of the Great Chain of being. All creation exists for him. He is expected to be a wise steward: but ultimately, all created and living things exist for him to use. Usually the verse from Genesis 2.20 is cited here where Adam is given the task of naming the creatures: but once the negative connections are made with the way the Christian Gospel followed in the wake of, for example, the conquistadors of Latin America, then it is clear that - in the crucial historical period when capitalism was developing - Christianity became the text underpinning dominance over both nature and indigenous peoples, with specific reference to the creation story of the Book of Genesis. (I want to make clear that this is a mis-use of Scripture - so far from the mind and purposes of the origin of the text that it is hard to grasp). Here is the way Christopher Columbus acted the rôle of Adam in naming the territories of the so-called New World:

To each bit of land he brought the mental map of Europe with which he had sailed. Anciently ... place names arose like rocks or trees out of the contours of the lands themselves ... As a group took up residence in an area, that area would be dotted with names commemorating events that took place in it. Now came these newest arrivals, but the first names by which they designated the islands were in no way appropriate to the islands themselves. Instead, the Admiral scattered the nomenclature Christianity over these lands, firing his familiar names like cannonballs against the unresisting New World ... One group was called Los Santos because the Christ-bearer sailed past them on All Saints' Day ... Armoured Adam in this naked garden, he established dominion by naming.²¹

The power of naming - which the American theologian Mary Daly has made central to the new journey of women to wholeness - is seen here as an expression of imperialism with regard to the resources of nature and indigenous peoples alike. And it would be possible to trace through history the powerful consequences which the mythic story of the Garden of Eden has had, particularly as a myth which seemed to justify western expansionism. Think, for example, of the

¹⁹Catherine Keller, "A Green Ecumancy," in Diamond and Orenstein eds., *Reweaving the World*.

²⁰See Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in Rosaldo M.z and Lamphere L eds., *Women, Culture and Society*, (Stanford University Press, 1974).

²¹Frederick Turner, *Beyond Geography: the Western Spirit against the Wilderness*, (New Brunswick NJ, Rutgers University Press), p.131.

way it was used in the opening up of the American West. Wild, unruly nature, the wilderness, which - it was said - needed to be tamed by rationality and seizure of land - and we know what happened to the indigenous Indian population.

From dominion to stewardship, you might argue is the next step. Yet I think we have to radically question the meaning we are giving to stewardship. Although this rightly stresses responsibility, it fails to respect all life forms for their own sake. Treatment is still meted out to animals, plants and trees according to their usefulness to human beings. Usefulness to humanity is presumed to be the point of their existence. So even when churches call for eco-justice in their best traditions of social justice, it is difficult to break free from their dualistic, modernist heritage. I want to sketch a way forward on several fronts. First I will reclaim dimensions of the Jewish and Christian heritage which ground - what I call a *re-imagined ecclesia*. Then I explore the mission of the Church as ecological; and thirdly, I look at the revelation of the Divine given when theology itself is rooted in the specificity of the bio-region. If our Christian ecclesial life sprang from a conviction that we - along with all members of the earth community - truly dwell, on this earth, body and spirit, with our histories, memories, energies, hopes and dreams - could there be a transformed theology of *ecclesia*?

II Becoming Ecological Community

I present here some ancient root dimensions of faith now re-imagined ecologically, namely, the sacramental, the mystical and the covenant traditions.²² But I want to discuss these in connection with recovering a dimension of prophetic ecclesia. I cannot separate the one from the other - in fact I have just finished a book arguing that prophecy and mysticism belong together and both must be recovered for contemporary Church. For too long the dualistic separation between social justice - prophetic, and reverencing the earth - mystical and sacramental - have blinded us from recognising that damage to the earth is also part of the sin of structural injustice.

Opening ourselves to the holiness of God in creation as expressed through all life forms - and the artists, poets and musicians have been faithful, where the theologians have followed a body-denying trajectory - at the same time we mourn that so many sacramental expressions of western church have stifled both our awareness and sense of responsibility to the earth community. (A few weeks ago, at a Justice and Peace Conference, when about to end with a gesture of prophetic anointing of each other for the mission of doing justice, the churchman presiding warned that this was not a proper sacrament - merely a sacramental gesture. Thus do we rob sacred symbols of their God-given power). The heavens may be telling of the glory of God, as Psalm 19 proclaims, but the actual experience of created realities within our worship is minimal. *It is as if we left our bodies at the Church door*. The raw material of our liturgies - bread, wine, oil, salt, water, soil, trees, flowers, fruits of the earth - are evocative of nature. But, sadly, that is all they frequently are - evocative, but empty of ecological connections. We do not make the connections between bread and how it is produced, who produces it, who is blessed through the eating of it and who starves from the lack of it. "Water gives life" as our sacramental baptismal catechesis tells us, yet huge areas of the world are sinking into desert, and thousands of people never know what it means to have running water in their own houses. Through my work in *Wells for India* - a small charity set up by my husband Nicholas in 1987 - I have seen how *Water gives life* means exactly that. As a village gains access to water, the desert turns green and a transformed quality of life is possible. Children have energy to go to school. The women do not have to cross the desert in search of a well which has not dried up and are able to begin spinning, weaving or planting trees. There is a renewal of hope that village life is sustainable and there

²²Some of the material which follows is explored in greater length in M.Grey, *Beyond the Dark Night - a Way Forward for the Church?* (London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1997), forthcoming. Some of these strands are discussed by others in different contexts: Rosemary Ruether, *Gaia and God*, (Harper Collins 1993), John Haught, *The Promise of Nature: Ecology and Cosmic Purpose*, (New York, Paulist 1993), Catherine Halkes, *New Creation*, (London, SPCK, 1993).

needs to be no desperate flight to the cities to dwell on the pavements. Nearer at home than Rajasthan Charles Dickens made exactly these connections, when, in the opening of his famous novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, with the well-loved words

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the
age of wisdom, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch
of incredulity ...²³,

he described how for one glorious day wine flowed free in a poor French village. The wine barrel had burst and out of the hovels in which the peasants were living people came running with jugs, mugs - anything to scoop up the wine. But at the same time, in the gutters of Paris, the blood of the aristocrats was flowing from the guillotine. Blood, wine, suffering and oppression - Dickens made all the sacramental connections, even if he was not concerned about liturgy.

Yet the urgency of making these connections within our sacramental life is no passing trend, useful only because of environmental urgency: if Church is sacrament it is because she is the active following of Christ: and to encounter the earthly Jesus was to encounter God. It was an embodied encounter with the itinerant Palestinian Jew from a poor Galilean fishing community, who knew in every fibre of his being the interdependency of all life forms.²⁴ "Even the wind and the sea obey him" was the cry. (Mark 4.41). A man who appreciated the beauty of the lilies of the field, the vulnerability of the life of the sparrow, the culture of the vineyard, who knew what it was like to be out all night fishing and catch nothing, was familiar with the process of bread-making, (Luke 13.20) and knew the seasons of sowing and reaping. To take seriously the metaphor suggested by Sallie McFague and Grace Jantzen that the world is *the body of God*, then to make the interconnections between all life forms of the bio-region and conditions of work, with the way culture attends to bodily needs, (just to mention a few areas), is to meet the compassion and vulnerability of the Creator in all these lived conditions of material life. It means that when we read how even the most humble of English birds - the wren and the blue-tit - are dying out because they are being shot and served up as gourmet dishes for the supper-tables in France and Northern Italy, then it is the Body of God that is suffering. *That dimension of the Body of God is dying*. Today's encounter is no longer with the earthly Jesus, but with the Christ/Christa of community. So *ecological ecclesia* is the place where we encounter creation as grace, blessing and responsibility - on both local and global levels. The sacramental encounter is not about sanctifying nature - but about *encountering the holiness already there*. Glimpsing but not grasping the transcendent mystery of God at our fingertips. Caught up in the mutual transfiguration process which is what the journey to new creation is all about. As the poet challenges:

Do you love this world?
Do you cherish your humble and silky life?
Do you adore the green grass, with its terror beneath...?²⁵

And we see this very movingly expressed by Dostoevsky in his novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, when the young monk Alyosha goes late at night to the cell, where his mentor or starets, the saintly Zossima is lying dead in his coffin. There follows an intense spiritual encounter of prayer with the dead starets. As he leaves,

Alyosha did not step on the steps, but went down rapidly.
His soul, overflowing with rapture, was craving for freedom
and unlimited space. The vault of heaven, studded with
softly shining stars, stretched wide and vast over him ... The

²³Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, (London, Chapman and Hall, The Biographical Edn, XV), p.1.

²⁴See Edward Echlin, "The Ecology of Jesus," in *Ecotheology* 2, 1996.

²⁵Mary Oliver, "Peonies", in *New and Selected Poems*, (Boston, Beacon, 1992).

silence of the earth seemed to merge with the silence of the heavens, the mystery of the earth seemed to merge into the silence of the heavens ... Alyosha stood, gazed, and suddenly he threw himself flat upon the earth. He did not know why he was embracing it ... It was as though the threads from all those innumerable worlds of God met all at once in his soul. He had fallen upon the earth a weak youth, but he rose from it a resolute fighter for the rest of his life, he realised and felt it suddenly at the very moment of his rapture.²⁶

Strength, grace and revelation from the earth - this does not sound like the earth as inert nature, mere backcloth to human endeavour, but nature as deeply involved in the cosmic drama. To be caught up in adoration of the sheer grace of nature is to begin to make a response to God whose own eros is expressed by the unceasing outpouring of love in creation, a God for whom *matter matters*. Could Sacramental hallowing offer a way to the rediscovery of soul in this fragmented society?

Mysticism too is grounded in the experience of the sacredness of the earth. Yet, frequently, it has seemed that a misinterpretation of mysticism implied that the mystic is greedy for other worlds, losing touch with mysticism's own sacramental roots. Believing in what I call "cosmic homelessness" - that our true home lies beyond the universe - has had a devastating effect on Christian theology. But the mystical dimension need not locate itself beyond, but point to God revealed - as to Alyosha - both in the mystery of creation as well as in its homely earthiness. The ecological mystic today is not so much the beholder of bright lights and voices - but is that experience of being seized by the wholeness and interconnectedness of creation as caught up in the sustaining energy of God. But a vision to which the whole of ecclesia is invited. The late Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, experienced this epiphany of connectedness in a trip to the town of Louisville:

In Louisville ... in the centre of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realisation that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness ... I have the immense joy of being a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate ...

There is no way of telling people that they are walking round shining like the sun.²⁷

We could multiply experiences like this from such disparate contexts as ecofeminist spirituality and Buddhist mysticism. But mysticism as community response to creation is a profound if hidden strand of mainstream Christian theology. The creation spirituality of Hildegard of Bingen - singing of the greenness/viriditas of creation, the power of the greening Spirit as the life-giving source of creation links mysticism and the community's action of praise. But the mystic today is as involved in the political struggle as in contemplative silence, since the struggle to allow the **earth** to experience a Resurrection story - that the waste lands of the earth may blossom anew - is as much political as mystical.

The last strand I call on is the covenant relationship between God and creation. The ravaging of the earth is the wounding of the Body of God. God's pain is the earth's pain. But all the ravaging does not diminish the solid bedrock of fidelity which is the very being of God. We human beings - not God - rupture the covenant relationship. It can seem as if the birds and the beasts are more faithful than we are. As Job in all his pain cried out:

²⁶Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, (Baltimore, Penguin, 1963), 2, 426-7.

²⁷Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, (London, Burns and Oates, 1965, 1995, pp.156-7.

But ask the beasts, and they will teach you;
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
or the plants of the earth and they will teach you;
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.
Who among all of these does not know
that the hand of the Lord has done this? (Job 12.7-9)

The theme of the faithful animals is a profound scriptural theme - and indeed runs through many ancient mythologies. Think of Isaiah 1, where "the ox knows his master's crib" - which was Francis of Assisi's inspiration for the crib of Christmas. What covenant means for Christians is that unshakeable call to fidelity to the vision of the Kingdom of God which Jesus lived and died for. The fact of his death on the Cross showed that Jesus gave the last breath of life and energy believing in this great dream of life restored and renewed: and the hallmark of discipleship is that we follow him today and are present, where the suffering of the cosmos is at its most acute. Larry Rasmussen, in a moving and sensitive essay, showed that the places of suffering creation were also the places where the power of Cross and Resurrection would be manifest:

Until our pain is intensified at the sight of creation's pain, as God's is, there is no redemption ... until we enter the places of suffering and experience them with those entangled there, as God does, our actions will not be co-redemptive.²⁸

Rasmussen argues that power that does not go to the places where community and creation are most obviously ruptured and ruined - and that will include the women, children and indigenous peoples suffering from a dearth of the most basic resources, is no power for healing at all:

The only power that can truly heal and keep the creation is power drawn instinctively to the *flawed places of existence*, there to call forth from the desperate and the needy themselves extraordinary yet common powers that they did not even know they had.²⁹

The radical inclusivity of the justice of the Kingdom of God has been too much for our imaginations to grasp. But this is a limitation of our imagination and hierarchies of concern - not a failure of prophetic justice. For the prophets had a strong sense of ecological justice - and it is this Jubilee tradition we call on in a new covenant with the poor communities of the world, as we approach the millennium. Even if the prophets did not make the links we now make between poor women and ecological devastation, the mission of *ecological ecclesia* cannot now fail to make these connections, and to integrate them into the heart of her self-understanding. And it is to this that I now turn.

III The Mission of Ecological Ecclesia

The church has always understood its mission as the command to proclaim the Gospel to the ends of the earth.³⁰ But at the heart of this is its fidelity to Jesus' announcing of his own mission

²⁸Larry Rasmussen, "Returning to our Senses: the Theology of the Cross as a Theology for Eco-justice", in *After Nature's Revolt*, op cit., p.49.

²⁹Ibid., p.49

³⁰See *The New Catholic Catechism*, (London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1994).

that the poor would have the good news preached to them. And we should be clear that we have no romanticised idea as to who the poor are: they are the vulnerable and abused children, oppressed women and indigenous people, rejected elderly people, AIDS sufferers, refugees and homeless people, the long-term unemployed, those marginalised through race or sexual preference: these fall within the biblical category of the poor and claim both our compassion and structural justice. They do actually dwell at the flawed places of existence - in shop doorways, under bridges, fleeing persecution, in poorly-resourced psychiatric hospitals, or cleaning office blocks late at night. There is another category of the "spiritually poor" which includes the economically rich, who are deprived of spiritual resources, suffer from broken relationships, and the pressures of the professional rat-race. Christian social thinkers are well aware of the danger of the focus shifting to the needs of the "spiritually poor" to the detriment of those who are in desperate need of political and economic justice.

But if being present to the "flawed places of existence" is at the heart of Christian discipleship, it is here that we are conscientised as to the interwovenness of the suffering of nature and suffering of poor people. As Sallie McFague has said, if Jesus came to preach the good news to the poor, then *nature herself belongs to the category of the new poor*. Where the Amazonian forest is destroyed, the Yanomani Indians are made homeless and their very survival threatened. The Chernobyl disaster killed off a whole bio-region and a generation of children were smitten with leukaemia. In certain drought-stricken villages in Rajasthan, which Wells for India has surveyed, over half the children die before the age of five through water-related diseases. But the shift I am calling for is not to save nature in order to save people, but to see how the well-being and survival of both belong together. Together we flourish or die - as women theologians from the Third World have been pleading with us for years. And now at last, liberation theologians have awoken to the vital connection between the struggle for justice and environmental degradation.

What gives me hope is that pastoral care - *cura animarum* is actually what the Churches are good at, and good at adapting its focus and interpretation. Mission theology has also shown its ability to adapt and re-interpret its own focus. There has been a massive volte-face and repentance from an imperialistic, colonialist mission theology - alas, not yet total - where, as we have seen with the example of Columbus naming the territories, eurocentric and paternalist patterns of care were exported to conquered territories. The stress is now far more on supporting indigenous community struggles and discovering appropriate forms of solidarity - as well as learning from their cosmologies which have far more affinity with the earth's rhythms.

Secondly, what the Church needs to develop in its rôle as Teacher, proclaiming truth, is what is meant by *ecological truth*. Truth is not only enshrined in propositions but is embodied in the rhythms around us. The most ancient instinct of the religions has been to formalise and celebrate this in ritual. Already we have a liturgical year which follows the dying/rising of the seasons, a symbolism of light in the darkness, traditions of blessing the first fruits, the harvest, the sowing of the seed - (and we see a flourishing of this in the renewed interest in Celtic spirituality). Ecological truth teaches us our limits and our finitude, our place amidst the humble creatures, our dependency and our interdependency in the vast scheme of things. In the acceptance of our humble place in the universe's story there are new alliances being forged between science, cosmology and faith. Thomas Berry - that great visionary priest - has suggested that in the basic structure of the universe and principles of its evolutionary development there could be an intimation of the Divine Trinity. First, the principle of differentiation: "Diversity, complexity, variation, disparity, wild articulation - all these at the very heart of cosmic evolution, guarantee a constant flowering of the unique", says Larry Rasmussen.³¹ The second principle is that of autopoiesis, autonomy, or the capacity of the organism for creativity, self-governance, independence and survival. The third is that of communion, connection and interrelatedness. Rasmussen says that there is a deep aboriginal kinship between all created things, since all is stardust. (Ibid). We may speak about the body as a "communion of tissues" or a galaxy as a

³¹Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, (Geneva, WCC, 1996), p.29.

communion of stars and their worlds. These three principles - diversity, autonomy and interconnectedness - form the integrity of creation. This is ecological truth - truth gained from patient attention to and deep awareness of the world around us. Is it too fanciful to read an intimation of the Trinity in this ecological awareness?

This intuition can be deepened by extending the Church's rôle as Mother not as one of fostering dependency, but through mothering as caring, and particularly through the notion of caring contemplation. A caring contemplation arises from the dimensions of Church discussed earlier - the sacramental and the mystical: this is an active contemplation fuelled by a tenderness towards other life forms. In this caring attention to God's great project of giving birth to the transfigured creation, the Church actually becomes the midwife to the process - since God's is always the initiative in grace. What all this is saying about mission is that rather than insisting on a centralised control from the top, the stress here is on paying attention to the interdependence of all life-communities, teaching their goodness, working for their survival and healing, and enabling new harmonies between people and nature. As the Book of Revelation puts it:

And the leaves of the Tree were for the healing of the nations.
(Rev. 22.2)

IV Dwelling and Divine Epiphany

In my final section I return to the central concern of this lecture, which has been to ground the identity of ecclesia in earth community, and in the earth's story, thus inspiring new ethical priorities, and envisioning the future of humankind and earth's future as intrinsically interwoven. Dwelling is being seen as a real dimension of becoming Church and I am ending with a kind of meditation and then with an ethical appeal. For there is another aspect of dwelling which is the revelation or *epiphany* of God given when we explore where we dwell as the locus of divine gift and presence. If the world is the arena of the embodying of God, then God's revelation is unfolding around us in the daily drama of the concrete circumstances of living - in garden, city, desert, mountain ...

For example, the God revealed in the garden teaches us to let go of earthly existence graciously, yet at the same time to delight in its richness and diversity. To learn that perpetual existence is not the inalienable right of human beings can both teach us to be aware of the tragic dimension of cosmic existence, and stimulate a listening to the crying of the earth, her great need for us to struggle for justice for the communities of soil, earth and water.³² While taking seriously our specific responsibilities as humans to earth communities, in respect of vulnerability, fragility and dependence, we stand organically related to all living things.

At the same time as cultivating the awareness of the revelation of the God of the Garden, the need to become *ecological ecclesia* in today's cities is an urgent task. The problems of Calcutta, Bombay, Cairo, Sao Paulo and Mexico, overwhelming as they are, are directly related to the situation in the villages. To eke out a living on the pavements has frequently become the only option because life in the village was no longer sustainable. Yet ironically, cities have expressed human dreaming and concrete attempts to build cosmopolitan communities of justice. Nor is the contrast between city and village so absolute. In Ajmer, in Rajasthan, I have watched as in the height of rush hour the traffic came to a halt as, in the middle of a large roundabout, it was time to feed the cows, who peacefully munched their hay and who, in any case, wander freely through the city. The huge needs of a mass of people and all living creatures calls urgently for an ecology

³²See Alvin Pitcher, *Listen to the Crying of the Earth: cultivating Creation Communities*, (Cleveland, The Pilgrim Press, 1993).

of the city - for growing things, open air, green spaces, unpolluted water, ecological waste disposal and recycling. Because the glittering shopping malls and the National Lottery have become today's version of the old *Bread and circuses* of the Roman empire - with the added problem that supermarkets offer products out of season from around the world, our consciousness is dulled as to **what grows where and when**. God revealed as passion for justice-making is the unique revelation or epiphany in the city. The God who comes with energy for justice in the city, the Christ who walks with the homeless, the Spirit building community in the department stores and market places, is the God given when we work for just connectedness with all things. Dorothy Day, the great American fighter for justice, is a powerful illustration of this: she discovered real joy in creation and ecological sensitivity during a brief time on Staten Island - yet poured all her energies into creating communities in the inner cities and struggling against poverty.

And the God of the desert? Is this the real desert of which I have been speaking, where the harsh reality sends women further and further in search of water? Or is it the desert caused by deforestation? Or the desert of the inner city, where community has been an impossible dream? Or the desert of solitude, of being stripped of all but that which is essential? The epiphany of God offered through the metaphor of the desert - I stress the word *metaphor* because I am always frightened that we lose the reality of what it is like for real desert-dwellers - is that of awareness of Divine presence reached through simplicity and being-made-empty. The desert experience yields a counter-cultural spirituality of paying attention (in a post-modern culture of flickering attention and of developing the caring contemplation to which I have been referring). And the praxis of living by the ethic of enough is enough, of saying no to unsustainable patterns of consumption.

But the crucial feature of all of this, especially here tonight in this great Cathedral, is that this is a community of experience, a community which sees its commitment to the well-being of the whole of creation as the heart of praxis of faith today.

Conclusion

It is no accident that interconnectedness with all creation is discovered at a time when fragmentation through competitive individualism is seemingly unstoppable. Actually, as I said in the beginning, we know the answer to the problems. We know the facts of the crisis and we know the answer is sustainable living. No amount of exploration on Mars should prevent us from facing the situation with honesty.

This is why I have chosen to respond by a renewed theology of community, namely, *ecological ecclesia*. Self-interest appears to have won the day, yet ecclesia draws on resources which could yet and must turn the tide. As community we draw on the wellsprings of repentance from structural sin - if we engage with this before it is too late. Our community's very identity is expressed through the act of communal worship - and it is here that we can engage in the fullness of response with body, mind and heart: sacred time and space meet, sacred cosmology is enacted in the Eucharistic act of thanksgiving - earthed in the specificity of either concrete well-being or disease of the basic stuff of living. And in this act of wondering contemplation we touch the traditions of all great faiths - Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, African tribal faiths and indigenous cosmologies - which reverence creation, traditions of caring, compassion and ethical sensitivity - especially traditions which have actually lived out of the praxis of ethical sensitivity and compassion more than we have. Christian ecological community especially highlights a concern for the most vulnerable and neglected: if a compassionate God cares about the common sparrow, as Jesus declared, then clearly God is concerned for the vanishing wren, blue-tit, thrush and destroyed tracts of forest. Institutional Church and Christ's Kingdom of justice and peace will always be in tension. But, as I argued, if the Church's concern is the *'cura animarum'*, the caring ministry, the urgency is to see care for persons and care for earth as intertwined. This is not simply to argue for environmental concern for motives of self-interest - as is normally the case. (If

you do not have strict environmental regulation then you will not survive - is the usual motivation). It is to understand care, compassion and interconnectedness as the sustaining energy of community - but to extend this to soil, earth, plant and animal communities. Yes, attitudes to pastoral care now include a relationship with alienated creation as part of the healing process of abused women, men and children; but the fundamental reason is eschatological: cosmic future, human future and God's dream for creation are all dependent on the quality of caring, quality of tenderness we embody in our earth communities. The paradox is that God has made God's very self vulnerable to our response. Grace is green, and yearning to flourish in every seedling, sapling and in the deserts where once again water flows. The Holy Spirit, the Sophia or wisdom of God - from the dawn of creation - is empowering every life breath. She will still weave this fragile web into new creation, into the ecological renewed Holy City. Her power is the power of interconnection, fragile yet charged with the promise of renewing the face of the earth. Millions of candles have been lit all over the globe - sparks of hope that there may be yet the metanoia for which communities of justice long: I pray they burn here for ecological community in Chelmsford - and far beyond.

