

# Does Creation have a Future?

Edward P. Echlin

In our scientific age, fascinated with dinosaurs and origins, we readily image creation as beginnings—of people, of life, the cosmos, the Bang. And the beginnings *are* creation, active creation, all things becoming and developing in dependence upon God. But creation is more than beginnings, creation, all that is not God, is God's self gift. Creation, says the Catechism of the Catholic Church, is "the foundation of all God's saving plans." (280) Creation, it must be added, is more than a backdrop to human redemption. Creation is precious *in itself*.

Creation also has a future. The future of God's creation, the eighth day, what the bible calls the new creation, especially the transformed future of the biosphere, our habitat on this frail planet which is our home, is within "God's saving plans". Neglect, indeed avoidance of the reality that our planet in some way shares our future—and that we have responsibility, during our brief mission here, for this planet which shares our destiny, accounts for some of the temporizing within the churches about reintegrating with the earth and renewing God's earth where it is damaged.

If Jesus risen were somehow in discontinuity with the Jesus who lived in Palestine, if the earth did not share our future, despite scientific testimony including the learning of the Hebrew Wisdom literature to our inherent relationships within it, if, in brief, salvation were independent of our relationships with other creatures, then Christianity would be a less ecologically inclusive religion. It must be said that a selective reading of the New Testament, of popular hymns, even of some social teaching, can appear to legitimate flights into psychologized spirituality, the delimitation of Christian mission to "spiritual and social needs of people", and complacent collusion with economocentric industrialism. Selective browsings can soothe the familiar fancy that "this world", while created by God and therefore good, is transient and must be left. If this world does not share our destiny we need not be too troubled about the damage consumerism is doing. Our final bliss, like the joy promised by the holiday programmes, is elsewhere. A church historian, while not explicitly endorsing acosmic anthroposolism, nevertheless echoes it.

The world is good, but it must be passed through, it must be left. We cannot settle among the good things God has given us; we are pilgrims, in transit, passing through the good things that are themselves passing away.<sup>1</sup>

A few decades ago when rainforests and oceans seemed comparatively healthy and the western way of proceeding apparently sustainable, dualistic spiritualities went almost unchallenged. Almost but not wholly, for even in the high summer of NASA and second Mustangs Vatican II was suggesting connections,

the pilgrim Church in her sacraments and institutions, which pertain to this present time, takes on the appearance of this passing world. She herself dwells among creatures who groan and travail in pain until now and await the revelation of the sons of God. (LG 48)

Does the Church only dwell “among” these creatures; or are these other creatures in some way within the Church? Are other yearning creatures ultimately disposable items to be left behind? What about whole species which in former epochs dwelt here for an hour leaving lonely traces in the fossil record? Is heavenly citizenship less inclusive than that of pilgrims here? In brief, is the awaited new heaven and earth in continuity with our familiar soil and sky? These questions are now churning everywhere just below the surface like a compost heap in June. (Significantly and with theological insight Sister Paula Gonzalez, the American biologist and Sister of Charity, noted recently that compost is an evocative symbol of resurrection!)

### **Christ The Centre**

We need to rediscover the Christ centred future of creation. To be followers of Christ incarnate, fully human like ourselves and risen transformed from the dead, is to be involved with the future of this earth. Christ risen is creation in microcosm and macrocosm. What happens in Christ happens in the whole creation. All cosmic history is contained in Christ, as it is contained within our planet and ourselves. Despite some inglorious history and continuing indifference to the destiny of the earth, Christians, when they are faithful to the depths of their tradition, can be trusted with God’s creation. Admittedly, to argue that Christians are a trustworthy, or even a tolerable presence within the created soil community, and, moreover, that Christian attunement to creation is grounded in the bible and the living tradition of the Church may seem surprising, at least to experienced conservationists. But as John Austin Baker observed in a recent address to Christian ecologists, “As usual, a robust adherence to the faith in its classic form turns out to be much more radically creative when faced with modern problems than does a belief-system tailored to fit the thought of the times.”

### **The Faith Delivered**

The primordial Adam, the original ancestor of Jesus and of ourselves, is,

like ourselves, a soil creature: in the clever word play of the ancient Hebrew narrator Adam is *adamah*, an earth being who, in a full circle, returns, like living compost, to the earth dust from which he came (Gen. 3:19). The Hebrew anthropology was and remains profound. The Genesis author perceived that Adam functions best when women and men, under God, inhabit the garden together. People, from the origins of humanity on this earth, are gender related. Eve and Adam are also flora and fauna related. As Pope John Paul II noted in an audience in 1990, "Animals have the breath of life and were given it by God. In this respect man, created by the hand of God, is identical with all other living creatures." This vital breath we share not only with our large mammalian relatives but with *all* that lives (Ps. 104:27–30).

The so called "fall" or original sin of Adam and Eve is really the evolutionary stumble into consciousness of our race. As soon as primal creatures are free and conscious we need redemption. The Genesis story of the Eden pioneers and the serpent and the tree is a profound aetiological myth: that is, the Eden story imaginatively reflects on our present condition. Having blundered into consciousness and lacking the restraints of instinctive wisdom people are free to grasp the forbidden fruit and, in our time, with massive technology and mobility, to extinguish the forest ecosystem. The core of the Catholic doctrine of original sin is that from our origins as free and conscious beings we humans need redemption. "From the very dawn of history man abused his liberty" (GS 13). Because we share the breath of life with other creatures they too are effected by our sinful history—and share our hope for a transformed future in which cosmic rightness dwells (Rom. 8:19–23).

The Eden blunder reaches its defiant climax not in the primal garden but on the hill at Golgotha at high noon—and that defiance continues in the abuse of the earth, God's self gift in His creation, manifest in the ecological crisis today. I can think of no better paradigm of our "fallen" predicament than the twisted rhetoric that rolls out of the UK Department of Transport including that of a succession of transport ministers who dutifully read motor lobby lines while wounding rails. Take this example read to millions one night on television:

I drive down our motorway and I see all these lorries, and I say, My God, we still have an economy. The more goods and services, which are what people want, the more roads, the more construction. It follows naturally, it's not a conspiracy. It's what people want!

Unfortunately "more goods and services, more roads and construction" is "what people want". Adam's blunder taints *all* because *all* are stumblers. In our recognition of the implacable greed of developed societies and the

equally implacable aspirations of the less developed we and the road lobbyists are in agreement: "It's what people want".

People also "want"—and are offered more. It is of Christian faith that people, with all our fellow creatures, all things, are saved, redeemed, reconciled, to mention but three of the ten metaphors Paul uses for our healing, in the total love, obedience and self gift of Jesus of Palestine (Col. 1:19–20).

## **The Birth of New Life**

To return again to beginnings: the small, at first unnoticed events at Nazareth and Bethlehem, like the stumble and defiance in Eden garden, are profoundly ecological and cosmic. Our forthcoming millennium is cosmic. In the words of Pope John Paul II,

The fact that in the fullness of time the Eternal Word took on the condition of a creature gives a unique cosmic value to the event which took place in Bethlehem 2000 years ago. Because of the Word, the world of creatures is a cosmos, an ordered universe. And it is the same Word who, by taking flesh, renews the cosmic order of creation.<sup>5</sup>

In the conception and birth of Jesus of Nazareth, God's Word, immanent in creation from the first beginnings, in the stunning phrase of the Advent liturgy, "leapt down from his royal throne." (Jn.1:1, 14; 1 Jn. 1:1)

Balaam the gentile prophet and his donkey, Balaam who foresaw the star and future king, the ox and ass at their Master's manger, the angels singing and shining above the fields, the earthy shepherds and their sheep—the whole Bethlehem beginnings are rich with ecologically evocative symbols for those with imagination to discover treasures in fields and kings in straw. A cosmic superintelligence comes from contemplating the profound silence within the Christian story in the New Testament. G.K. Chesterton, with towering imagination and boundless wonder, saw flowers looking up at Christ; and stars gazing down. The Word's incarnation in Christ, the new Adam and second root of our race, transcends the depth of Adam's blunder: outrushing the fall of man is the height of the fall of God. Creation, incarnation and redemption are in harmony in Bethlehem. Union with God's Word in Jesus, that Word which, says Irenaeus, is "from the beginning present in his creation", is the future of creation.

In Jesus, the new Adam, "in every respect tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15), the whole cosmic and human history is contained, as it is contained in our humanity. Through Mary of Nazareth Jesus inherits traces of primal stardust and of ancient tropical seas. That Jesus as human is a soil being, an earthling like ourselves, is consistent not

only with revelation but with all we know from science about “the universe story” and with the Hebrew anthropology that humanity as *adamah* is related to other earth beings and returns to dust. The Irish ecological theologian Dermot Lane writes,

Because Jesus is a child of the cosmos, there is an important sense in which we can say God has taken hold of the whole of creation in Jesus. The God who created heaven and earth, the God who created the human as an earthling is the same God who became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth as a child of the cosmos.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Disjunctive Transformation**

On Golgotha hill the rejection begun with the Eden stumble reaches its cosmic climax. Jesus’s redemptive death in the dark, like his birth in the straw, is a cosmic event. The earth, according to Matthew, trembles in its depths, the rocks crumble, darkness hovers at noon, the heavens split open, and, as at his Baptism in the depths of the rift valley, Jesus is proclaimed God’s son (Mt. 27:51–53).

In Jesus, the new Adam, the whole soil community of this earth suffers the disjunctive transformation of the cross. In Jesus the earth dies sharply and painfully. The earth dies—to be transformed. *Vita mutatur non tollitur*. Life is changed, transformed, but not taken away. The millions of crosses and crucifixes now beckoning all over our inhabited planet proclaim that in the death of Jesus something cosmic happened. On the cross the future transformation of our planet has begun.

### **The Rebirth of Creation**

For in the deep silence, commemorated in our liturgies on Good Friday and Holy Saturday, God raised Jesus from the dead, “a clamorous mystery”, says Ignatius of Antioch, “wrought in the stillness of God” (Eph. 19:1). The resurrection itself was unseen. But Jesus appeared and was recognized by scores who had known him (Mt 28:9–10; 1 Cor. 15:3–8). And the tomb where they had placed him in the hillside was empty (Mk. 16:1–8). There is continuity in the Jesus risen and glorified and the pre-Easter Jesus buried in the gloom on Good Friday.

In Jesus risen this earth has a future, in him the earth is initially transformed and transfigured. In Jesus all people and all other species who live and have lived and will live have a future. As early as the fourth century, Ambrose, Bishop of Milan (339–397) said seminally, “In Christ the world has risen, heaven has risen, the earth has risen” (PL 16.1344). In the resurrection of Jesus there is a cosmic ecological event after the death of the Founder of the Christian religion.

## Descent and Ascent

Descent is an ancient Christian metaphor. Descent, says Noel Dermot O'Donoghue, is "a pressing of the finite to its own limits when the infinite reveals itself within it."<sup>7</sup> God's Word *descended* from the royal throne, entered the womb of Mary, went down into the Jordan rift, onto the cross and was buried in the depths of the tomb. Descent has cosmic connotations. The descent into hell or Sheol, the traditional resting place of all the dead, effects times and places and heights and depths. By the symbol of Jesus's *descent* into the depths of hell or Sheol and his ascent far above all the heavens we profess our faith that Jesus risen fills every created time and place, past and present, in heaven and on earth. "By passing actively from Sheol into heaven", says New Testament scholar Lionel Swain,

Jesus has made his presence felt in all the cosmos. Nowhere, no created thing is outside the sphere of his all embracing influence. His descent into the nether regions of the cosmos, followed by his Ascension "far above all the heavens" is part of the process whereby he fills all things.<sup>8</sup>

Jesus risen and exalted far above the heavens will, in the familiar words of the Nicene Creed, "come again in glory to judge both the living and the dead." The parousia, or coming, of Jesus in glory is not the return of Our Lord now absent—but the tangible manifestation of his presence filling the cosmos. We who now share Christ's suffering—and will share death—will share his glory when he is fully revealed (1 Pt. 4:13). Our fellow creatures, now awaiting the liberation of our species, will share our future.

The precise details of human and earth transformation are hidden—and remain mysterious. Vatican II observed, "We do not know the time for the consummation of the earth and of humanity. Nor do we know how all things will be transformed" (GS 39). "How such a transformation will occur, and what form it will take remains elusively mysterious," notes Roman theologian Gerald O'Collins.<sup>9</sup> A theologian, living in hope and hopeful silence, is, as Karl Rahner said, a custodian of the *docta ignorantia futuri*, the learned ignorance of the future.

But we may say that the disruptive transformation of the cross prefigures the disruptive future of the cosmos; and that the new creation, "a new dwelling place and a new earth where justice will abide" (GS 39), is not *ex nihilo*, from nothing, but transformative, in continuity, with the present creation; and that God's living Spirit who "in the beginning" moved over the waters, who inspired the authors of the bible and who inspires the Church, will in the parousia manifest "the new heavens and

new earth” inclusive of “all things”; and finally, we may say that people, the conscious edge of cosmic history, facilitate, enable and contribute to God’s kingdom by renewing and restoring our own bioregions now.<sup>10</sup>

### **Repentant Eucharistic Communities**

Local eucharistic communities, gathered around an ordained celebrant, in solidarity with other local communities across the earth, anticipating the parousia, begin, in our own local bioregions, symbolically *and really* to transform the earth (1 Cor. 11:26). The eucharist is a profound—and almost untapped—Christian ecological resource. At the eucharist we lead creation at prayer. We are communities of epiclesis—that is, we call down God’s blessing on the whole creation which is symbolized in local bread and wine (Rom. 6:4). When “we call to mind our sins” we include ecological sins, the defiant rejection of God in his self gift in his creatures. Ecological sins, violating God’s order, damage the water, soil, climate and biodiversity upon which bread and wine depend (Deut. 11:13). In economocentric societies a eucharistic community proclaims, in a countercultural celebration, that the Sabbath is not for an economocentric week but the week for the Sabbath. The Sabbath testifies to sovereignty, God’s sovereignty over our week, our planet, and ourselves. As a democratized kingly and priestly people, we memorialize the climactic death and triumph of the Lord of Life who on this same earth overcame death for ourselves and all our fellow creatures.

Transformative practice flows from the eucharist. In our petitions let us include our fellow creatures and those who care for them. As a priestly and kingly people, under God, we “lay down our lives for our sheep” by consuming less and restoring to health the creatures in our own bioregional soil communities. Organically produced bread and wine, “which earth has given and human hands have made”, are cosmic symbols, fruits of the whole local soil community including the culture of human work. The liturgical theologian Gordon Lathrop writes,

Bread unites the fruitful goodness of the earth with the ancient history of human cultivation. Bread represents the earth and the rain, growing grains, sowing and reaping, milling and baking, together with the mystery of yeast. ... The translucent liquid also holds together the fruitful earth, the sun and the rain, the ancient history of human cultivation, and the mystery of yeast and fermentation. It also is a food that has been made in endless local varieties, bearing the mark of local cultures. It too is meant for a group—the cup for sharing, the bottle too much for one—and seems to be misused when drunk alone. Here, poured out for a human circle, there flows the goodness of the earth pressed out, the sun made liquid.<sup>11</sup>



By respecting God's created order which gives seasons, rain, grain and grapes, by sharing earth's gifts with all people everywhere and with the whole creation, especially by *healing* and restoring our own damaged bioregions, Christian communities *convincingly* offer the cosmos, symbolized in local bread and wine, in Jesus the Cosmic Christ, to the Father in the living Spirit. At our eucharists we share with each other, and, then, we also "give communion" to other creatures, the whole local soil community which gives to us our bread and wine. As a royal priestly presence, shepherd kings within creation, Christians continue the eucharistic offering all week by nurturing and leading fellow creatures in praise of God the Father, through Jesus, in the living Spirit.

In exile on the Euphrates, with the Davidic monarchy but a stump, poetic Jewish writers dreamed not only of a king but of an eschatological kingdom in which wild and domestic animals, people and the traditional reptilian creatures which threaten people will live in peace. Wild animals will be at peace with people, with the plants and domestic animals of people, and among themselves (Job 5:22–23). The serpent will eat not children but dust. People will eat not animals but seeds and fruit and plants (Gen. 1:26; Is. 11:6–9; 65:25).<sup>12</sup> When we reflect on this vision, as on Advent Sunday, are we to dream of this kingdom as a mere dream? Already we do not need to kill animals for our safety or clothes, or ivory, or other luxuries. We do not need to vivisect animals, or send them distances to slaughter. Will we soon perhaps, like some of the medieval ascetics, kill animals for meat only for health reasons? Such a kingdom will not come in our lifetimes. But by including animals, plants, indeed the whole soil community, in our eucharist prayers and praise we will facilitate a more peaceful kingdom than now exists.

## Conclusion

The "good things" of this life are neither "to be left" nor "passing away". Creation has a future—and the future matters. Local eucharistic communities, repentantly living in sustainable sufficiency and renewing local habitats, begin to make effective the transformation begun in Jesus Christ. We frail and fallible people are nonetheless cosmic beings, with a cosmic mission, in the Cosmic Christ, forever renewing and preparing the soil community in anticipation of "the new heavens and new earth", the transformed cosmos, where inclusive justice abides.

- 1 Eamon Duffy, "An Open Letter to the Bishops". *Priests & People*, March, 1995, p. 114.
- 2 Sr. Paula Gonzalez, S.C., "An Eco-Prophetic Parish?", *Embracing Earth: Catholic Approaches to Ecology*, Albert J. LaChance & John E. Carroll, eds., Orbis, N.Y., 1994, p. 223.
- 3 John Austin Baker, "Some Theological Questions about Christian Environmental Concern", *Crucible*, Spring, 1995, p. 82.



- 4 Christopher Dwyer, "Animals and the Catholic Church", *The Month*, June 1995, p. 248.
- 5 John Paul II, "Apostolic Letter for Jubilee Year 2000", *Catholic International*, March, 1995, p. 113.
- 6 Dermot A. Lane, "The Future of Creation", *Milltown Studies*, Autumn 1994, p. 108.
- 7 Noel Dermot O'Donoghue, *Heaven in Ordinarie*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1972, p. 192.
- 8 Lionel Swain, "Descent of Christ into Hell", *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Joseph A Komonchak, Mary Collins, Dermot A. Lane, eds., Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1987, p. 288.
- 9 Gerald O'Collins, SJ, *Jesus Risen, The resurrection, what actually happened and what does it mean?*, DLT, London, 1987, p. 155.
- 10 Lane, "The Future of Creation", pp. 111-112.
- 11 Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology*, Fortress, Minneapolis, 1993, pp. 91-92.
- 12 Richard Bauckham, "Jesus and the Wild Animals (Mark 1:13): A Christological Image for an Ecological Age", in *Jesus of Nazareth, Lord and Christ*, J.B. Green and M. Turner, eds., Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1994, pp. 19-21.

## Reviews

**REINHOLD NIEBUHR AND CHRISTIAN REALISM** by Robin W Lovin.  
*Cambridge University Press, 1995. x + 255pp. Hardback £35.00, paperback £11.95.*

Reinhold Niebuhr's books and journalism covering theology, ethics, political philosophy, historical, social, and cultural issues, and his political activism, teaching, preaching, and prayer challenge those with a predilection for classification. When Walter Reuther, president of the United Auto Workers Union, sought Niebuhr's counsel to help him devise a strategy for the latest pay claim, it was not because he needed to speak to a non-reductive coherentist ethical naturalist Christian Realist. However, having taken up the challenge, these categories describe Robin Lovin's Niebuhr, and by neatly organizing Niebuhr's life and work in 'Niebuhr's century', he has attempted to ensure that its essence is available for the 'new century'.

Lovin first situates Niebuhr as a Christian Realist, a term coined in 1941 by Niebuhr's friend and colleague John C Bennett, but the theological stance originates as 'Religious Realism' with D C Macintosh, a former teacher of Niebuhr. According to Lovin, Christian Realism is a combination of political, moral, and theological realisms. Theological realism provides the ground for both the moral experience in that morality requires a meaningful universe, and political realism because if the ultimate context of choice is ignored, political thought and action will soon go wrong. Christian Realism as a version of moral realism holds