

## ECOLOGICAL AND MYSTICAL SPIRITUALITY FROM AN INTERFAITH PERSPECTIVE

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PROFESSOR URSULA KING FRSA

### Introduction

The occasion of giving the Alister Hardy Memorial Lecture provides an opportune moment to reflect on the meaning of spirituality in relation to nature and culture as understood today. Sir Alister Hardy concluded his book on *The Spiritual Nature of Man. A study of contemporary religious experience*<sup>1</sup> with a chapter on "What is Spirituality?" Based on his pioneering work on religious experience he provided a definition of spirituality focused on "transcendental reality" expressed not only through an awareness of the presence of God, but also through a number of other characteristics including an "awareness of a presence in nature" and an "experience of a unity with nature". I want to explore particularly these two aspects, and I will do this with the help of several ecological and religious thinkers.

Our experience of nature – of the whole natural world or the *biosphere* – is very much the experience of *one planet*, of the living world as a great, wondrous, precious and ever so vulnerable habitat threatened by many disasters and much human destruction. The general awareness of the history of the earth, of the history of life, and the great biodiversity of the planet is much greater than in Alister Hardy's own days, and the awareness and experience of nature are different too among our contemporaries. Both the media and the environmental movement have contributed much to this change.

We all live on the same planet; we form one humanity; we share a common responsibility for the future of life on earth and for our own, human future. In the history of our planet and that of human consciousness, it is appropriate to reflect on the transformative potential of spirituality, for we can perceive in our current geo-political situation the outlines of what has been called a "world civilization", the consciousness of one world – a world of terrifying, but also hopeful complexity. The word "globalisation" has negative associations for many people; the process it refers to is far too often only criticized for its excesses and negative effects. Yet the consciousness of the *global*, of one planet, one world, also has positive features in terms of a greater sense of belonging together. A new, global sense of responsibility and ethics has emerged in the world which tries to address global problems through a concerted human effort, through a growing consensus created by sharing the same intentions and spirit.

More than ten years ago, the Club of Rome published its much discussed report *The First Global Revolution*<sup>2</sup> which stressed that our world possesses a promising opportunity, one unlikely to be provided again, to shape a new understanding and new attitudes towards the *world as a whole*. Whilst contemporary societies are much confused about morals and ethics, whilst we experience much social, educational, personal and environmental chaos, the Club of Rome report argued that it is essential for humanity to respond to this unique opportunity for a global revolution and find the *wisdom* needed to deal with it in the right way. But how can we find such wisdom? How can we deal with our personal, social and ecological predicaments? Traditionally, religions have fostered wisdom and morality, have shaped individuals and groups, yet their teachings have shown few outward signs of success because their loftiest ideals have rarely been put fully into practice.

For the Club of Rome to appeal to inherited wisdom was a momentous step; it was an appeal to our global religious and philosophical heritage, but also to the task of analysing the powers of spirituality for contemporary society and culture, and to discern the different cultural and historical expressions of spirituality whilst assessing their significance for contemporary ecological thinking and concerns. More recently, the American ecological thinker Thomas Berry, much shaped by his deep knowledge of American native traditions, of eastern religions, and the work of the French thinker Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, also spoke about the need to draw on the resources of wisdom in his seminal book *The Great Work. Our Way into the Future*.<sup>3</sup> The great work, which is the work of all the people, is “to create a mutually enhancing mode of human dwelling on the planet Earth”. Thomas Berry speaks of the need to rediscover the spiritual sense of the universe and the need “to reinvent the human”. To create a viable earth community, to develop the new world vision required for building a viable human future, the politics, education and financial arrangements around the globe – or governance, universities and corporations – need fundamental restructuring. This task is impossible to achieve if humankind does not creatively draw on what Berry calls the “four wisdoms”: 1. the wisdom of the classical traditions, that is to say the wisdom of traditional religions and philosophies; 2. the wisdom of native peoples; 3. the wisdom of women; 4. the much more recent and newer wisdom of science.

This is a profound insight, for we have so far little explored the spiritual resources of science and nature. The convergence of traditional spiritual perspectives of a religious consciousness with some of the spiritual insights that modern science yields is a truly exciting development for human consciousness and community.

So how can we relate ecology, spirituality and our global religious heritage?

### **Ecology, Spirituality and World Faiths**

Ecological concerns are at the top of many contemporary agendas but what does the growth in ecological awareness imply? Ecology is often simply described as a practical discipline concerned with the study of organisms in their environments or “homes”. “Environment” seems to refer to both our external environment and to nature as a whole, of which we as human beings are a part. The words “as a whole” are of decisive importance here, for scientists study different ecosystems from micro-level to macro-level. These are never isolated but interconnected within a greater whole, so that ultimately the whole planet is understood as one vast ecosystem. The interconnectedness of this system as a living whole, which we call “Earth”, must be made explicit whenever possible. Such a perspective leads to ecology as a philosophy, as a way of thinking about the world, which includes thinking about *spirituality* as our way of being in and part of the world as a whole, of our acting within and

through it, and in connection with other people. To quote from Anne Primavesi's fine book *From Apocalypse to Genesis*:<sup>4</sup>

The particular challenge posed by ecology today, which is also its most exciting opportunity, is that we adopt a systemic approach to life through accepting the systemic nature of the individual human being, the systemic nature of the culture in which we live, and the systemic nature of the biological and industrial systems which surround us. Then we may go onto the recognition of and guidance by a knowledge of the total systemic creature, the world.<sup>5</sup>

She follows James Lovelock in naming this creature, this living planet, "Gaia" after the Earth Goddess of the ancient Greeks. More recently Primavesi has developed her theological reflection further in her book *Sacred Gaia*.<sup>6</sup> This presents us with a new holistic theology as "earth science" that stresses "the connectedness, diversity and sacredness of all beings".<sup>7</sup> When she describes the ecological paradigm as demanding "that we cultivate a sense of belonging to a system that functions as a whole, no matter how small or large the particular system one is engaged with at any one time ... that we extend our awareness to the other systems with which we interact and to their interaction with further ones",<sup>8</sup> this seems to me a feature worth considering with regard to spirituality within a contemporary interfaith perspective. But what is spirituality? How to define it?

The word "spirituality" is widely used, but surrounded by much conceptual confusion. However described, the subject matter of spirituality seems to be a perennial human concern, but the way this concern finds expression varies greatly from culture to culture, and from one religion to another. We all know that there are different schools of spirituality, and that past and present spirituality are not necessarily the same, even within the same religious tradition. Spirituality is a widely ramified concept; as a word it has its origin in the Christian tradition, but today its usage has become universalised – itself a modern development – and is found in connection with all religions. It is used in a comparative and interfaith context as well as in a secular context outside religious institutions altogether.

The fast growing studies on spirituality<sup>9</sup> make clear that several distinctions help to clarify the meaning of spirituality. From a historical point of view, different spiritualities are different cultural forms or the expression of different religious ideals. From the point of view of a person of faith, spirituality forms part of the history of divine-human interaction, a breakthrough of the spirit into history, a piercing through beyond history. Spirituality, not as an idea or concept but as *praxis*, is resonant with the longings of the human spirit for the permanent, eternal, everlasting – for wholeness, peace, joy and bliss, which have haunted human beings throughout history and which many persons on our planet are seeking today.

Ewert Cousins, in his introduction to the series *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*,<sup>10</sup> describes spirituality as being concerned with the inner movements of the human spirit towards the real, the transcendent, the divine. Spirituality is understood as wisdom intended to help one follow a path, guiding one on a journey towards the goal of spiritual realisation. Cousins also emphasises that following such a path today must include dialogue with other spiritual traditions in the world. His well-known series on *World Spirituality* includes books on the spirituality of all the major faiths as well as volumes on *Spirituality and the Secular Quest*, *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, and the *Encounter of Spiritualities*.

Spirituality can thus be seen as a faith's wisdom to live that faith. But this definition does not exhaust the understanding of spirituality; it may even be too individualistic, too static and past-oriented, without expressing the dynamic, transformative quality of spirituality as *lived*

*experience* not only for individuals, but whole communities. Spirituality is the great adventure of human minds and souls seeking their own transcendence, but it has also become an important focus in interfaith encounter and dialogue. Furthermore, spirituality can also be understood as an intellectual discipline of study and critical reflection, as the comparative study of different spiritual disciplines that has only emerged in recent years.

We can distinguish three distinct, but interdependent levels in the understanding of spirituality: 1. spirituality as lived experience or praxis; 2. spirituality as a teaching that grows out of this praxis and guides it in turn, such as the spiritual disciplines and counsels of perfection found in different religions; 3. the systematic, comparative and critical study of spiritual experiences and teachings which has developed in our own time in quite a new way. Arising out of these we must ask what significance spirituality has within our contemporary global environment? How can it actively and holistically help to shape persons and planet?

One of the greatest challenges today is to find what might be called “a spirituality-of-being-in-the-world”, a deeply reflective, responsible and responsive spirituality that addresses the practical problems and tasks of our world, including the great environmental tasks of species conservation and ecologically sustainable development. Many traditional spiritualities are neither connected to the *world as a whole* nor to the *every-day world* of our lives. In many ways, traditional spirituality has to be reconceived and re-visioned in order to become a true leaven of life.

In other words, within the holistic perspective of an ecological paradigm, how can spirituality help to bring about the personal and social transformation our world so urgently needs? How can we revision spirituality ecologically, and what contribution can the world faiths make to this?

### **Re-visioning Spirituality Ecologically**

There is a burgeoning of interest in spirituality, both inside and outside religious institutions, but much of this interest is rather unwholesome and unconnected with ideas about the *world as a whole*. Much spirituality is too past-oriented, too static, too focused on the individual person’s inwardness. This emphasis goes together with the modern focus on the subject, on individual self-development and notions of personal fulfillment based on trends in modern psychology. But such an approach does not understand spirituality *ecologically*, as a dynamic process and vivifying energy connected *with all of life*, but sees it rather in separation and isolation from other aspects of human experience. Nor is the traditional Christian understanding of spirituality of help here, since much of it developed in the cloister and consisted of ascetic and monastic practices, even though these were ultimately grounded in community. Moreover, traditional spirituality is predominantly cast in a strongly patriarchal, hierarchical and dualistic mode. It was often considered an exclusively male domain where the search for holiness was built on the contempt of the body and the world, and even more on the contempt of women.

Past spiritual advice was often based on strong dualistic notions dividing the ordinary world of work and matter from that of the spirit. Today we need a different kind of “*spirituality-of-being in-the-world*”, a spirituality of being connected to the ordinary life in the world with its daily relationships and responsibilities, a spirituality which makes sense of our environment without and within. Such a perspective is not without its precedents in earlier religious teachings, but on reading many spiritual “classics” today, one is often struck by the one-

sided emphasis on renunciation and asceticism, sometimes developed to pathological extremes. One is equally struck, especially as a woman, by the discovery that what first appears as gender-neutral spiritual advice, addressed to apparently asexual beings, in practice often turns out to be the advice of male spiritual mentors to their male disciples, so that spiritual writings throughout world religious literature contain many sexist and antifeminist passages which cannot promote the balanced wholeness and interpersonal connections we seek and need today. From a contemporary planetary and personal perspective much of traditional spirituality has to be reconceived and re-visited.

Many religions, the Indian religions in particular, know of two parallel models of spirituality – an ascetic/monastic model on one hand and a model of “householder spirituality” on the other. If we extend the parameters of this model, we can say that our world today needs this latter model at an individual and social level – the responsible householder who takes care of the “*oikos*”, of our house which is the world, and of the “*oikumene*” which refers to the whole inhabited world, the globe or planet, from which all life springs, and which feeds and sustains it in one continuous living web.

Creative visionaries can see the world and humanity as one in spite of their confusing and contradictory complexities. But only relatively few thinkers have considered the planetary dimensions and global importance of spirituality. One such visionary was Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) whose consciousness of the immensity of the earth and its people, their common origin and destiny, developed through his geological and biological studies, his extensive travels in North Africa and Asia, especially in China, but also his experience of the global dimensions of the First World War.<sup>11</sup> During night watches in the trenches the whole world appeared to him as one great “thing”, as if perceived from the moon. He described the globe as surrounded by a layer of blueness which for him symbolised the density of thought. He later called this the *noosphere*, understood as a layer of mind and consciousness within the layer of life covering the earth. Many years later, the image of our globe floating against a blue background became familiar all over the world through the famous photograph taken of the earth from the moon – the picture of our bluish-green planet suspended in space and surrounded by blackness, so aptly entitled “*Earthrise*”. As one commentator has rightly pointed out:

For ... decades, we humans have viewed this marvellous sight, and it has impacted our psyches with deep images of interconnectedness and beauty. This picture has become for many of us a mandala of spiritual renewal and hope, an image of our evolution toward oneness and global awareness that Teilhard foresaw ... However, for all its beauty, stillness, and simplicity, this earth portrait does not convey the existence of the particulars: the varied racial, ethnic, religious, economic, and cultural diversities among humans, as well as the variety and splendour of myriad species of our planet.”<sup>12</sup>

To allow for this, we have to think of the immense diversity of the *biosphere* and *noosphere* – the sphere of life on earth and the sphere of human thought and will, of love and action, which were closely interwoven and interdependent for Teilhard de Chardin. He spoke of the “planetisation” – or what we would today call the globalisation – of humanity. Through modern science and technology humanity is ever more closely being drawn together through external forces, but the human community is not yet moved by the same spirit; it is still searching a centre, a heart. As Teilhard wrote in one of his books, *The Vision of the Past*:

Around the sphere of the earth’s rock-mass there stretches a real layer of animated matter, the layer of living creatures and human beings, the biosphere. The great educative value of geology consists in the fact that by disclosing to us an earth which is truly *one*, an earth which is in fact but a single body since it has a face, it recalls to us the possibilities of establishing

higher and higher degrees of organic unity in the zone of thought which envelops the world. In truth it is impossible to keep one's gaze constantly fixed on the vast horizons opened out to us by science without feeling the stirrings of an obscure desire to see people drawn closer and closer together by an ever-increasing knowledge and sympathy until finally, in obedience to some divine attraction, there remains but one heart and one soul on the face of the earth.<sup>13</sup>

But the success of a search for such a synthesis is by no means assured. When passages as the one just quoted are read out of context, Teilhard de Chardin is often misjudged as too optimistic a thinker. Yet he asked himself whether this process of human planetisation may in fact be successful and will really lead to the unity we need. "*Synthesis implies risk*", he wrote. "Life is less certain than death."<sup>14</sup> If the pressure of the earth forces us into some form of closer coming together, it is not at all certain that "ultra-hominisation" will occur, that a balanced human and earth community can be created. Certain external and internal conditions have to be met for human and natural life to remain in balance, and these conditions are a tremendous challenge to humanity. Life on earth will fail if the following external conditions are not met:

Should the planet become uninhabitable before mankind has reached maturity; should there be a premature lack of bread or essential metals; or, what would be still more serious, an insufficiency, either in quantity or quality, of cerebral matter needed to store, transmit, and increase the sum total of knowledge and aspirations that at any given moment make up the collective germ of the noosphere: should any of these conditions occur, then, there can be no doubt that it would mean the failure of life on earth; and the world's effort fully to centre upon itself could only be attempted again elsewhere at some other point in the heavens.<sup>15</sup>

As to the internal conditions needed, these are bound up with the full exercise of human freedom: "a *know-how to do*" to avoid various traps and blind alleys such as "politico-social mechanisation, administrative bottle-necks, over-population, counter-selections" and, most important "a *will to do*", not to opt out, not to be discouraged by difficulties or fears.<sup>16</sup>

Teilhard de Chardin was much concerned with "building the earth", with developing "the spirit of one earth", of seeing the whole world and all people within it as one. Central to his understanding of the human phenomenon and the place of spirituality within it was the role and power of love, of people relating to each other and being connected and inspired by the deepest energy available to us. Today we hear much about development, but this is mostly understood in material and economic terms; it is seen as a problem of wealth and justice, as the distribution of resources and a balance of power. But Teilhard was asking for more than that when he posed the question of how far we have thought of the spiritual dimensions of development. We assess the material energy resources of our planet, but what spiritual energy resources do we have to sustain persons and planet? The convergent encounter and dialogue between people of different faiths in East and West is essential today since the world's religious and philosophical traditions possess irreplaceable spiritual energy resources that can make a creative contribution to the future of our planet.

In an article on "Ecological Spirituality and its Practical Consequences", the philosopher Henryk Skolimowski<sup>17</sup> speaks about the need for "spiritual reconstruction" which is based on a reverential treatment of the world and ourselves. According to him, "the true work of ecology is not only through campaigns to save this or that threatened habitat (though this is important too) but also creating an attitude of mind within which the ecological and spiritual are one."<sup>18</sup> From an ecological perspective "spirituality is not about what gods you praise and how piously you do it, but about how your life affects other human beings, and other beings in the universe, including natural habitats and Mother Earth herself."<sup>19</sup> For Skolimowski practical and spiritual questions go together, requiring a new kind of awareness and

commitment. He fervently advocates the need for an “ecology of the mind” to cleanse and change it and save ourselves from all forms of dangerous pollution of a mental kind:

The ecology of mind leads you to acquire ecological consciousness, which in turn leads you to right values, which are the foundations of right modes of action.<sup>20</sup>

These interconnections between consciousness, values and right action are not unlike some of the principles of Buddhism. If we fostered a greater awareness of these principles in our lives, we would have the power to heal ourselves and our planet. Similar holistic perspectives about ecology and spirituality can be found in contemporary ecofeminism. I cannot discuss its considerable literature here, but would like to mention that nowhere has the theme of “Mother Earth”, of sacred matter as sacred mother, been more fully explored.<sup>21</sup> Many ecofeminists describe the earth as *Gaia*, and some connect this theme with the Mother Goddess whereas others understand it in a pantheistic or panentheistic sense. Apart from a general understanding of the universe as a self-regulating organism and a general emphasis on respect and care, for the reverence of life as sacred, and the need for “earth healing” to redeem and reverse our destruction and domination of the earth,<sup>22</sup> there appears no common doctrinal core to the various attempts to formulate a truly ecological spirituality. As always in newly emerging fields, much more reflective work and critical debate are needed for a clarification of all the issues involved.

This also applies to the Christian attempts of developing a “Theology in Green” or foster the “greening” of the churches. If it were that simple, we could advance more quickly. It is not just a matter of incorporating some ecological concerns here and there, but of transforming our whole worldview, our attitudes, our relationships, our ethics, our politics, and that means developing an all-embracing, holistic spirituality.

I would like to offer now some reflections on the importance of interfaith encounter and dialogue for the development of an ecological spirituality which is at the same time also a deeply mystical spirituality in its profound reverence for nature and the spirit of planet earth.

### **Interfaith Dialogue, Ecological and Mystical Spirituality**

Interfaith encounter is not only about our past religious heritage but about living our faith today and responding to the great agonies of our world. We have to ask ourselves in what way the deepest insights of our faiths can contribute to the spiritual transformation of the contemporary world, to an ecology of the mind as well as to an ecology of the environment. If one considers the natural and social world – cosmos and humanity – as undergoing a vast process of development which at present often appears to be chaotic and destructive, one must ask to what extent a more holistic, ecological way of looking at the whole world as *one* makes it imperative for members of different faiths to come closer together and cooperate in a new spirit. What the world needs most of all is a new global order and a new global ethic on whose fundamentals we can all agree. By way of example just think how much could be achieved if Muslims and Christians in the world, who represent half the global population, worked closely together for the well-being of the whole human community.

It is worth quoting the eminent Harvard biologist, Edward Wilson, here who in his book *The Future of Life*<sup>23</sup> underlines the great ethical task of ensuring a future life for all species, including the human species. He is just as optimistic as Teilhard de Chardin, not only by advocating *biophilia* or the love of life, but he says that “science and technology are

themselves reason for optimism”<sup>24</sup>, that since the 1990s there has been “a true revolution in global conservation”,<sup>25</sup> and that a further reason for cautious optimism is

the growing prominence of the environment in religious thought. The trend is important not only for its moral content, but for the conservatism and authenticity of its nature. Religious leaders are by necessity very careful in the values they choose to promote. The sacred texts from which they draw authority tolerate few amendments. In modern times, as knowledge of the material world and the human predicament has soared, the leaders have followed rather than led the evolution of ethics. First into the new terrain venture saints and radical theologians. They are followed by growing numbers of the faithful and then, warily, by the bishops, patriarchs, and imams.

For the Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the environmental ethic is compatible with belief in the holiness of the Earth and the perception of nature as God’s handiwork.<sup>26</sup>

Wilson devotes three pages of his book to discussing the efforts of religious groups for conservation and is of the opinion that if the two powerful sources of science and religion could unite, then some of the environmental problems could be quickly solved. At the same time concrete measures, such as examining the ecological footprint and the Living Planet Index, can provide a basis for wiser economic planning while the global technology of worldwide on-line information “will allow people everywhere to see the planet as the astronauts see it, a little sphere with a razor-thin coat of life too fragile to bear careless tampering.”<sup>27</sup>

Another pressing environmental concern is the violence and destruction wrought by continuous wars on our planet. No other period in human history has been so deeply marked by a confrontational war culture than ours. The twentieth century has been called the most murderous century in which an estimated 187 million human beings have been killed in the numerous terrible wars since 1914 – that is to say 10 % of what was the world’s population in 1913 lost their lives through war.<sup>28</sup> In our global situation today it is imperative to promote peace if we want to achieve a truly ecological balance. Religious leaders in the interfaith movement have long been aware of this. For example, the first World Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893, already explicitly stated that one of its objectives was the aim “to bring the nations of the earth into a more friendly fellowship in the hope of securing permanent international peace”.

Nobody has more emphasised the decisive role of religions in the process of global peace-making than the Christian theologian Hans Küng who has repeatedly said: “No human life together without a world ethic for the nations; no peace among the nations without peace among the religions; no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions”.<sup>29</sup> His work was instrumental in creating the *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic* at the Chicago Parliament of the World’s Religions in 1993 (Centenary celebration of the 1893 Parliament). The first section of this *Declaration* deals with our urgent need for a culture of non-violence and respect for life. It speaks of the infinite preciousness of human beings, but also the protection, preservation and care which the lives of animals and plants deserve:

Limitless exploitation of the natural foundations of life, ruthless destruction of the biosphere, and militarization of the cosmos are all outrages. As human beings we have a special responsibility – especially with a view to future generations – for Earth and the cosmos, for the air, water, and soil. We are **all intertwined together** in this cosmos and we are all dependent on each other. Each one of us depends on the welfare of all. Therefore the dominance of humanity over nature and the cosmos must not be encouraged. Instead we must cultivate living in harmony with nature and the cosmos.<sup>30</sup>



To some, this may not be a strong enough expression of the change of heart and urgent action that are needed to bring about the necessary transformation in our attitudes to the environment. As is the case with any declaration, the demands are too vague and not sufficiently specific to be of much help. The ecological crisis needs to be spelled out in considerable detail to shock people into greater awareness, and influence their will to change their habits.

The need to promote a radical agenda for positive change is strongly argued by the report of the Independent Commission on Population and Quality of Life, *Caring for the Future. Making the Next Decades Provide a Life Worth Living*.<sup>31</sup> It makes the important point that the “carrying capacity” of our planet is strictly limited while the “caring capacity” of humanity has no limits. But at present the human community lacks the political will to act at a global level and take care of “the global commons”, such as water and oceans, the atmosphere and forests, for the good of all. The Commission “believes that we must transcend a narrow focus on the material basis of survival. We need now to establish our psychological, spiritual, and political capacities to care for each other as a determinant of progress and survival. The ethic of care – defining us as human beings – surmounts economic rationale: it can counteract individualism and greed. Caring for ourselves, for each other, for the environment is the basis upon which to erect sustainable improvement of the quality of life all around us. The care ethic now requires a drastic shift in paradigm.” The report seeks “a new humanism” in the context of dignity and care: “The notion of care for ourselves, for each other, and for the environment we occupy is the very basis on which the sustainable improvement of the quality of life must be developed.”<sup>32</sup>

To change our world means that we have to foster the resolve to change our ways. Only then can we create a new global order animated by a different, a new spirit. This will not be possible without a spiritual renewal and return to the values of life, and a common commitment to a qualitatively better life for all. Religious and spiritual renewal are now occurring in a secular, pluralistic context, and religions must relate and speak to that context. Both the study of different religions and the practice of interreligious encounter can help to foster a new spirit among different believers, so that religious people learn to practise peace rather than violence and help to promote ecological and spiritual balance. But for this to happen, renewal and reform have first to take place within each of the different religions themselves.

Embracing the earth, seeking the wholeness of the human community, working for a more balanced life of peace and justice, of more harmony with nature, and sharing a new awareness of the universe and of our responsibility for the future well-being of planet earth – these perspectives run like threads through the debates of interfaith dialogue, the discussions of First and Third World theologians, and of women theologians and ecofeminists around the world. They are also central to the World Council of Churches’ Study on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC) and find an echo in the works of many contemporary commentators and writers.

The transformation of our relationship to the earth – of the awareness of one planet, one spirit – has two different aspects. We need to develop a greater spirit of caring for the earth, but this spirit cannot develop in full without a change in awareness of our connection with and dependence on the earth and its products. Today the religious spirit is drawing great strength from this discovery of our rootedness in the earth and the awakening of a new sense of the cosmic. Many Christians feel inspired by a new approach to the whole of

creation and reappropriate a powerful *creation spirituality* which has numerous antecedents in the Christian tradition. Others speak of an ecological spirituality embracing the earth and assuming a new religious responsibility for the fate of the earth – an ability to respond with integrity and profound concern to our critical ecological situation. Carolyn Merchant, in her book *Radical Ecology*,<sup>33</sup> refers to “spiritual ecology” among one of several kinds of ecology rather than speaking about “ecological spirituality”. She writes that the main project of such a spiritual ecology

is to effect a transformation of values that in turn leads to action to heal the planet. Whatever religion or form of spirituality one practices, it is possible to find a connection to the earth and to the political work that needs to be done to change the present way of managing resources. Some religions are more radical than others and some envision a more radical political transformation than others.<sup>34</sup>

The radical reflections on ecology are of immense importance for the future of humanity and planet earth. They also have a deep impact on all forms of contemporary spirituality and have led to the emergence of a new ecological spirituality which is gradually affecting all faiths. But current ecological concerns are also bringing about the revival of very different ancient religious beliefs and practices, and the growth of new religious movements. There is talk about a new *ecothology*, even an *ecospirituality*, which is more bound up with the development of the earth in the light of contemporary ecological concerns than is the case with creation spirituality.<sup>35</sup> There exist quite a few attempts to develop a stronger ecological spirituality, not least in ecofeminism, where the concerns of the women’s movement come together with those of the ecological movement in order to work out what Rosemary Ruether has called “women healing Earth”.<sup>36</sup>

These new developments which bring together religion and ecology help us to re-vision spirituality ecologically. For developing such an ecological spirituality among members of different faiths, and through interfaith dialogue, important resources are provided by the *Forum on Religion and Ecology* organised by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim at Harvard University.<sup>37</sup>

A planetary, ecological vision together with a commitment to a culture of non-violence and peace also undergirds the principles of the *Earth Charter*, developed through an international consultation process and was approved at the Headquarters of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in Paris in March 2000. It is a declaration of fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable and peaceful global society in the twenty-first century, drawing its inspiration from among others “the wisdom of the world’s great religions and philosophical traditions”. Several religious organisations were part of its consultation process, and some religious groups have already issued statements in response to the *Earth Charter*. Its call for action includes the promotion of “a culture of tolerance, nonviolence and peace” (IV.16). It underlines the need for “sustainability education” (IV.14b) and “the importance of moral and spirituality education for sustainable living” (IV.14d). The *Earth Charter* calls all people to “Recognize that peace is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part” (IV.16f). This is a profoundly spiritual statement which draws on all religious and secular sources available to meet the greatest challenge humankind has ever met: to create a new peace culture on earth.<sup>38</sup>

Thomas Berry (1914-2009), the great contemporary Catholic thinker on ecology mentioned at the beginning of this paper, has pointed out that church authorities and many Christians

often show an amazing insensitivity to ecological issues. And yet these issues are the most urgent of all confronting humanity today. The “mutual enhancement of the human and natural” is a task Christians must dedicate themselves to, for in Berry’s view,

[T]he renewal of religion in the future will depend on our appreciation of the natural world as the locus for the meeting of the divine and the human. The universe itself is the primary divine revelation. The splendour and the beauty of the natural world in all its variety must be preserved if any worthy idea of the divine is to survive in the human community.”<sup>39</sup>

To renew the earth as “a bio-spiritual planet”, we need to draw creatively on all our available spiritual disciplines, use all our educational resources and energies in efforts which cross the traditional boundaries between different religions, spiritualities and cultures. Thinking of ecological spirituality also means that spirituality is understood in an evolutionary sense. Spirituality itself develops and unfolds so as to articulate the human condition in a way that is commensurate to a particular time and age. Contrary to an earlier instrumental attitude which explored and exploited nature, the ecological attitude approaches the natural world as our home and as a sanctuary which needs to be treated with responsibility, care and reverence.

Studying the epic of evolution through the history of an evolving universe, and through the history of our planet and its living forms, can create a new kind of religiousness, a deep sense of wonder and mystical awareness of oneness which links up with earlier mystical experiences, yet also contains something new. The ecofeminist liberation theologian Mary Grey has explored the path of “ecomysticism” in her book *Sacred Longings*,<sup>40</sup> whereas the biologist Ursula Goodenough has movingly written about *The Sacred Depths of Nature*,<sup>41</sup> where she articulates a “covenant with Mystery” and expresses a profound gratitude for being part of the immense web of life. The cosmologist Brian Swimme speaks about *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos*<sup>42</sup> and says “that science now enters its wisdom phase”.<sup>43</sup> These are fine contemporary examples of the spiritual experience, the sense of presence in, and oneness with, nature of which Alister Hardy spoke so long ago, and which we now experience anew.

People everywhere dream of a different world than the one we presently live in. They hope, work and pray for a better, a more just and peaceful world freed from wars and tensions. To transform our planet from one of disorder, violence and strife into one of peace and harmony, and prevent ecological disaster, does mean a change of heads and hearts. At present we have a world more torn apart than ever before, yet it is also a world that longs to be one. More people are beginning to discover a new awareness of living on one planet in need of one spirit and soul. To awaken and nurture a new ecological spirituality is a scientific, educational and mystical task which holds out great hope and promise for our world. It is a task to which we are all called.

## NOTES

1. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.
2. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991.
3. New York: Bell Tower, 1999. For the following quotations see the discussions in chapters 1, 14 and 16.
4. Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1991.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
6. London: Routledge, 2000.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
9. The literature on spirituality has grown enormously in recent years. I have discussed some of the ideas in this paper in greater depth in my book *The Search for Spirituality. Our global quest for meaning and fulfilment*. Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2009.
10. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1985.
11. For more details see my biography *Spirit of Fire. The Life and Vision of Teilhard de Chardin*. Maryknoll, New York; Orbis Books, 1996.
12. Bernice Marie-Daly, "Ecofeminism: Sacred Matter/Sacred Mother", *Teilhard Studies* 25, Chambersburg, PA: Anima Books and the American Teilhard Association for the Future of Man, Autumn 1991, p. 1.
13. Quoted in Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe*, London: Collins Fount Paperbacks, 1977, p. 75. The original comes from an essay on "The Face of the Earth" written in 1921 and is found in a slightly different translation in Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Vision of the Past*, London: Collins, 1966; see p. 45 f.
14. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Man's Place in Nature. The Human Zoological Group*. London: Collins, 1966, p. 117.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
16. *Ibid.*
17. In *The Teilhard Review* 27/2, 1992: pp. 43-53.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 50. These ideas are more fully developed in H. Skolimowski's book *Living Philosophy, Eco-Philosophy as a Tree of Life*. London: Penguin Books, 1992.
21. See for example Carol Adams, ed., *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994; Eleanor Rae, *Women, the Earth, the Divine*, New York: Continuum, 1993; Karen J. Warren, ed., *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997; Chris J. Cuomo, *Feminism and ecological communities. An ethic of flourishing*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.
22. See Rosemary Ruether, *Gaia and God. An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1992; London: SCM Press, 1993.
23. London: Little, Brown, 2002.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

25. Ibid., p. 172.
26. Ibid., p. 157.
27. Ibid.
28. These statistics were quoted by Eric Hobsbawm in *The Guardian* , 23 February 2002.
  
29. See Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility. In Search of a New World Ethic*, London: SCM, 1991, p. 138.
30. Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel, eds, *A Global Ethic. The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions*. London: SCM Press, 1993, p. 26.
31. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
32. Ibid., p. 296.
33. London and New York: Routledge, 1992.
34. Ibid., p. 129.
35. For a wide-ranging survey of these developments see the volume edited by David G. Hallman, *Ecotheology. Voices from South and North*. Geneva: WCC Publications and Maryknoll New York: Orbis Books, 1994. See also the journal *Ecotheology*. This journal, originally founded in 1992 under the title *Theology in Green*, was relaunched in 1996 under the new title of *Ecotheology* until, in 2007, it was renamed *The Journal of Religion, Nature and Culture*. According to its website, "the journal's expanded goals are to explore the relationships among human beings, their diverse religions, and the earth's living systems and to explore-- without oversimplifying -- what constitutes an ethically appropriate relationship between our own species and the natural worlds we inhabit." It is the official journal of the *International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*.
36. Hallman's book (quoted in note 35) contains a section on ecofeminism, but for women's voices from the South see especially Rosemary Radford Ruether, ed., *Women Healing Earth. Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996.
37. See the series "Religions of the World and Ecology" published by Harvard University Press; see also the journal *Earth Ethics*, and the article by Mary Evelyn Tucker "The Emerging Alliance of Religion and Ecology", *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion* 1 (1997): pp. 3-24.
38. For more information on the *Earth Charter*, contact Earth Charter International Secretariat c/o Earth Council, PO Box 319-6100 San José, Costa Rica. E-mail <info@earthcharter.org> ; website: <http://www.earthcharter.org>
39. See Thomas Berry, "Ecology and the Future of Catholicism. A Statement of the Problem" in Albert J. Lachance and John Carroll, eds, *Embracing Earth. Catholic Approaches to Ecology*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994, p. xii.
40. See Mary C. Grey, *Sacred Longings: Ecofeminist Theology and Globalization*. London: SCM Press, 2003.
41. New York: OUP, 1998.
42. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996.
43. Ibid. p. 3.

## **THE AUTHOR**

Ursula King STL (Paris), MA (Delhi) PhD (London), FRSA, is Professor Emerita of Theology and Religious Studies and Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies, University of Bristol. Educated in Germany, France, India and England, she has lectured all over the world and published numerous books and articles, especially on gender issues in religions, method and theory, modern Hinduism, interfaith dialogue, spirituality and on Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. She has held several visiting chairs in the USA and Norway, and been awarded honorary doctorates by the universities of Edinburgh, Oslo, and Dayton, Ohio.

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