Spirituality for an Eco-human Future

Sir Lloyd Geering Lecture, Sea of Faith Conference,

St Andrew's Church, Wellington.

October 7, 2022

Introduction

It is indeed an honour to be invited to deliver the Sir Lloyd Geering Lecture at this our Sea of Faith Network conference. My debt to Lloyd is enormous. I have long admired his ability to hold together a wide understanding of religion generally and Christianity in particular, in tension with the realities of a fast-changing society, and find a positive way through. In breadth of knowledge, depth of scholarship, honesty of purpose, and clarity of expression, he is simply outstanding. And as I continue to observe him from afar, he's a model of how to grow older, and older, and older.

Looking back, I first got to know Lloyd through the Continuing Education seminars he held around the country in the '70s and '80s. I was a little uncertain of him at that time. I thought of him as giving me a regular injection of heresy, where heresy was half "that's not what I really ought to think", and half "it can actually be OK to think otherwise." It became more and more OK as we went along.

When the Ephesus Group was formed in Wellington in 1990, he used to lead one session each year. When he took steps to launch the Sea of Faith in New Zealand, he turned to Ephesus to form the backbone of the committee planning the network's first national conference in Hamilton in 1993. As for my role as the first steering committee chairman. Lloyd alluded to the story of Abraham and said that "he'd played God and called" me. In later years he attended Ephesus regularly till he passed his 100th birthday.

And now here I am with the Sir Lloyd Geering Lecture, conscious of standing proudly on his shoulders, and hoping to do justice to him and his legacy.

"Spirituality"

My topic is *Spirituality for an Eco-human Future. "*Spirituality" can carry a range of meanings. When the word was first used in the 1400s it had none of the connotations it has today. It referred to the upper echelon of the church – the cardinals, bishops and abbots, a power collective sitting alongside the king and the nobles who together lorded it over the common people. There was royalty, there was the nobility, and there was the spirituality.

Today, spirituality refers to a person's interior experience. It's totally subjective. It's an aspect of our awareness that we can't readily explain or pin down, but has to do with our feelings, our yearning for "something more" beyond our work-a-day routine. It's an experience that gives meaning and direction to our lives. It's life-enhancing. At best it carries a sense of oneness with the totality of the life around us. There's a touch of sacredness about it. Bring all these together – the inward, the life-enhancing, the reaching beyond, the connectedness, the sacred – and you're getting close to a spirituality for our time.

To make my position clear, I shall be tackling the subject from the standpoint of a secular Christian – that is, one who accepts that our understanding of the world is vastly different from that in which Christianity evolved,

and therefore requires a fundamental rethinking of old assumptions and doctrines about God, the world, and our place in the magnificent – and sometimes scary – adventure of life.

And don't be put off by that word "secular". I don't mean "secularist", which implies a wholesale rejection of spirituality and religion. I use the word in the true sense of the Latin *saecularis,* meaning "belonging to a generation or age, of this time and place, relating to the here and now, not a world beyond". A religious way of life should always be grounded in the secular here and now.

Creation?

The only setting we have for an eco-human future is the planet we inhabit, often referred to as "creation". A word of caution here: "creation" is a religious word that implies a creator, a grand designer with a grander purpose. In the modern world, however, there's another explanation of our origins that's much more promising for thinking theologically about the world as we know it today.

So let's begin by seeing if we can arrive at a perspective on "creation" which grows out of the Judaeo-Christian heritage that's shaped life in the western world, yet which also does justice to the huge explosion of knowledge that has occurred over the past 400 years. Because, let's be clear, those years have radically changed just about everything under the sun – from home life, health care, education, work, to technology, agriculture, travel, religion, you name it. Wherever we turn, we experience the world very differently from the way our grandparents did. Few of us would want to turn the clock back on this knowledge explosion and what it offers.

Yet cumulatively, it's those very changes, along with a rapidly expanding population, that have brought our world to the brink. Humanity, long thought of as the pinnacle of creation, does seem to be slowly, blindly, defiantly, destroying the earth's ability to sustain us. Industry as we've come to know it carries massive risk for the future of the human species.

A growing number of prophets have warned of the pressures that human activity is putting on the planet's systems and resources. Among them are Rachel Carson, Arnold Toynbee, Martin Rees, Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, locally Lloyd Geering and Dave Lowe, climate scientists, United Nations panels, ngo's – there's a host of them, all calling passionately for humanity to turn away from destructive technologies, life-styles and values. Turn away: the biblical word for that is "repent".

Sketching the scene all too briefly, homo sapiens has taken the biblical advice to be fruitful and multiply so much to heart that the world's population has mushroomed from around 1.6 billion in 1900 to 8 billion today. We've added 2 billion since 1998, and are set to add another 2 billion by 2050. Each 2 billion is equivalent to another one-and-a-half Indias. India's population is growing much faster than China's, Africa's faster still.

More and more people need more and more of Earth's resources not only of food and water, but oil, iron, coal, copper, rare earths, and when the market's booming they're extracted as if there were no limits. Well, there **are** limits. No one's making any more of them. The question is how long we've got before they start running out.

Meanwhile advances in farming and industry have produced not only the standard of living we enjoy in the West, but also technologies that pollute air, water and soil on a grand scale, deplete the ozone layer, warm the oceans and make them more acidic, and generate climate change. In the name of progress and economic growth, developers raze rainforests, destroy long-established communities, and wipe out whole species of life.

A multitude of organisations campaign to reverse the process, but governments seem readier to listen to economists arguing for growth at all costs ahead of ecologists pleading for sustainability. Remember the Rio+20 sustainability summit in 2012? One observer commented: "Rarely has such a large elephant laboured so long to give birth to such a small mouse." The Paris summit in 2019 did only a little better, the 2021 Glasgow summit likewise, and still emissions are rising steadily, outpacing all the efficiency gains we've notched so far.

Governments promise much, but continue to dither. A Guardian investigation revealed in May this year that the world's biggest fossil fuel corporations have 195 projects on their books, most of them already under way. Each would detonate carbon bombs of at least a billion tonnes of carbon dioxide. "Unchecked greed," says the Guardian, "is driving us ever closer to the abyss." And it is undermining life on Earth.

Thomas Berry, an American monk and eco-theologian, dismally sums up: "Our ultimate failure as human beings is to become not a crowning glory of the earth, but the instrument of its degradation."*[The Dream of the Earth, p50]* A new word has come into the language to describe what's happening here: "ecocide".

Four perspectives

How on earth have we got ourselves into this predicament? Has religion played a part? What is its role in the future? I intend to focus here on the Judaeo-Christian tradition – that's the one New Zealanders are most familiar with – and later will sketch a more positive potential within Christianity today.

Throughout the 3000 years of Judaeo-Christian history there's been more than one perspective on the three-way inter-connectedness of God, humans and the Earth. I'll leave aside what people meant and mean by "God", and sketch four views of where we humans belong in this material world of space and time. In its day, each of these perspectives has been highly influential. Each carries its own brand of spirituality. Traces of each still linger in the way people relate to the natural world today.

■ First, there's the concept I imagine a lot of us absorbed as children, rooted in the opening chapter of Genesis. There we're told that God created the world, and it was all good. Here God is depicted as a divine being over and above creation, a supreme designer, a supernatural artist and craftsman, an inventive physicist, an innovative biologist – in a word, creator of all that is. Frances Alexander's hymn *All Things Bright and Beautiful* spells that out in detail. Written in 1848, it's the perfect pre-Darwinian expansion of the creedal "Maker of heaven and earth".

Of course that first chapter isn't science, though it reflects the science of its era. It came out of the Jewish exile in Babylon in the 6th century BC, and was a resounding hymn of assurance, composed to encourage the exiles to hold to the faith of their forefathers. It says God created the world good in every part, from the sun and moon and stars to plants and trees and birds and fish and beasts. Even humankind was blessed.

And then, catastrophe. In chapter two – a much earlier story, actually – Adam and Eve, i.e. humankind, messed up. You may have heard the limerick:

God's plan made a hopeful beginning,
But man spoilt his chances by sinning.
We hope that the story
Will end in God's glory –
But at present the other side's winning.

Despite all that, Genesis tells us, it was to men and women (mainly men, actually) that God gave "dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth". Unlimited authority to fill the earth and subdue it for human ends: that was the divine will. In this early phase of the story of civilisation, that attitude seemed natural, and way back then there were practical limits to the impact it could have on the earth. Spirituality assumed the reality of a supernatural God.

■ By the Middle Ages, this rosy view of the world and our place in it had turned very gloomy. In stark contrast to that emphasis of our earth blessed by the goodness of God, people had become weighed down by the appalling horror of sin. Earth had become a vale of woe, a sink of iniquity, the pits. One medieval writer lamented that we humans are "lodged here in the dirt and filth of the world, nailed and riveted to the worst and

deadest part of the universe, and most remote from the heavenly arch". Human fulfilment lay not here, but in the soul's release from this squalid dump into the bliss and purity of heaven. Spirituality was other-worldly.

Caring for creation? Oh, it had its uses in providing food, clothing, shelter. But beyond that, why bother? There were exceptions like Francis of Assisi, of course, but he stands out because they were so rare.

■ I wish I could say that that grim view had vanished from the modern world, but it hasn't. It's been given new life by fundamentalist Christians wedded to neo-conservative economics, especially in the United States. So when the Bible says "Have dominion over everything in nature", by hokey, they will – that's the way to economic growth, jobs, prosperity and riches.

It's not so long since the American Secretary of the Interior during Ronald Reagan's presidency, James Watt, was eager to give developers unlimited access to national parks and resources. His reasoning was that the earth (and I quote) "is merely a temporary way station on the road to eternal life. It is unimportant except as a place of testing to get into heaven. The earth was put here by the Lord for his people to subdue and to use it for profitable purposes on the way to the hereafter."

President Bolsonaro of Brazil echoed that when he contemplated burning the forests of Amazonia, mused on the mineral resources that may lie beneath and said: "Let's use the riches that God gave us for the wellbeing of our population." Bad theology has a lot to answer for.

Of course the big mining, manufacturing and agricultural companies don't rely on a theological argument to pursue their interests. Making money is reason enough. But common to both the medieval attitude and the modern economics-above-all-else approach is the view that nature has no intrinsic value: it is there to serve us, its masters, in whatever ways we wish. Why hold back? Spirituality had nothing to do with the Earth.

Here we should acknowledge that Christianity has unwittingly played a role in the development of such destructive thinking. For one of the great and liberating things that our Judaeo-Christian heritage achieved was to get rid of all the animistic gods and spirits that kept people's rapport with the natural world respectful. It was the emergence of a monotheistic worldview that freed scientific inquirers to explore without fear of upsetting any deities or haunting spirits. And look at the human progress – and I mean that quite seriously – look at the human progress that has flowed from that!

■ Nevertheless, that view of the natural world as sitting there waiting for humans to conquer and quarry won't do any more. In this present era we're being catapulted into a paradigm shift in human understanding. We're being forced to go right back to first principles and redefine the relationship of our species to the earth. The benefits of that relationship have to be mutual, not all one-way in our favour. And in the process, many who claim the name "Christian" find they're subtly changing the way they think about God.

A new story of origins

This paradigm shift, this evolving modern consciousness of the way humans might relate more positively to the earth, grows out of a new story of how we came to be here in the first place. That transforming story, which takes not six days but 13.7 billion years to unfold, is the great gift of science to our understanding of the planet and everything on it. It exalts the earth and gives us an exciting new perspective on our place within the wondrous miracle of life.

Our new story tells us that along with the universe, along with this planet, along with all the life forms present on earth, we humans are products of stardust and time. From the Big Bang at the very beginning, Earth has been continually evolving, geologically, physically, biologically, and human life is a unique part of that process

– not above it or below it, but an intrinsic part of it. We're not creatures poised halfway between demons and angels and with the potential to go either way: we're earthlings. We belong fully and firmly to the earth. Earth is not a mundane stepping-stone on our way to a realm beyond death. Our life here is almost certainly all the life we shall ever know. It's here that we must find meaning and purpose. It's here we must work out our salvation, which means finding our wholeness as creatures of the universe. It's here we must make sense of God, and find a spirituality that fits with all this.

And it's here, in order to care for creation, that we must rid ourselves of any lingering notion that the human species is free to lord it over nature. We have to replace that with a living awareness that we're but one strand – an important strand, but still only one strand – of the grand reality of nature, and every strand is to be nurtured and valued. We've become used to the word "humankind" referring to our own species: there's another new word embracing this wider, all-encompassing dimension: "lifekind", which must include the planet on which lifekind depends.

It's fair, though, to acknowledge that although we're basically a product of stardust and time just like everything else, the human species has developed one unique attribute: we are the consciousness of the planet. The consciousness, I emphasise; but not yet the conscience.

We make up what the French priest and philosopher Teilhard de Chardin called the noosphere, that envelope of awareness of the earth, and increasingly of each other, in a way no other life form shares. And it's that very attribute, that consciousness, that's now being challenged to respond to what has emerged as the great salvation/destruction question of our time:

How should we humans live upon the earth so that our presence enhances not just ourselves, not just human life, but the planet itself?

In terms of caring for creation, the question is pivotal. We've seen why. Since the Industrial Revolution humans have been using, exploiting, polluting, even trashing the environment on which we depend at an ever-increasing rate. The earth has been enhancing us: we have not been enhancing the earth. We've pushed the world to the brink.

Christian response

Maybe, though, you think the idea of enhancement goes too far. You might object that our proper role is stewardship, and in recent years there's been plenty of encouragement for that. The strength of stewardship is our accepting that we have a duty to care for creation. Its weakness is that it falls short of insisting on what follows from our new earth story – that in our evolving world we should be seeing ourselves, feeling ourselves, to be an integral part of nature, not beings above and beyond it, as "stewardship" can imply.

When we make that shift, we begin to see our relationship with the earth in a radically new light. That can be threatening to doctrinally-focused Christians, but I see it as just another facet of our evolving reality, to which the doctrine must adapt.

So it's encouraging that over the past two or three decades many churches have been quietly greening themselves. You see it in new hymns, hear it in some prayers and in the Anglican Prayer Book, find it in the Ephesus liturgies, and observe it in church-sponsored seminars, conferences and organisations.

Returning to theology, one of the things that theology today must take account of is the huge shift in our consciousness of power. Once God, conceived theistically, was assumed to have all the power. Only God was almighty. Only God was all-knowing, Only God was all-wise. Humanity came way back.

Not quite any more. Humans now have knowledge unimaginable to previous generations, and the power to move mountains, change the course of rivers, send landing-craft to Mars, manipulate genes, develop new

strains of plants and livestock, destroy forests, destroy species, destroy people en masse with nuclear weapons and poison gas and deadly viruses.

Where we fall short is in the wisdom to marshal all that knowledge and power for the betterment of our species, and of the planet that we share with all life. For along with our knowledge and power goes an awesome life-and-death responsibility new to our times, and the scorecard so far is very mixed. Some highly informed folk assess that the human species in relation to the planet is close to tipping-point – I've touched on that. Martin Rees, recently Britain's astronomer royal and former president of the Royal Society, warned of it in a book called in England *Our Final Century,* which the American edition changed to *Our Final Hour.* Maybe they elected Donald Trump to speed things up.

An American physicist, David Robinson, reflects the same concern in a book called *The Poised Century.* Which way we tilt will depend almost entirely on how we humans use our power: To preserve and sustain? Or to destroy. As Robinson says, "Given consciousness, we have the capacity for conscious evolution, the ability to look at our own actions, see their effect on ourselves and the world, and then act in new ways that will change our course from extinction to sustainability." (p29) The consciousness is ours, ours is the power. We can't just put our heads in the sand and hope for the best.

Extinction?

Robinson raises the prospect of extinction. Let's not scurry too quickly away from that, because it really is part of the picture. Climate trends show the world is on track for a 3°C warming by the year 2100, well past the 2° trigger that threatens drastic effects on the weather, oceans, fish stocks, species survival, human well-being. The fear is that nothing we can do will then prevent a further rise towards a 6° warming. "And," some predict, "6° gives you mass extinction." Not total extinction, mass extinction, which means that 50 per cent or more of existing species will vanish.

That's happened five times in the past 500 million years, when warming radically affected the world's oceans. It led to vast emissions of hydrogen sulphide gas, destroying the ozone layer and poisoning land species.

Today, as you know, it's burning fossil fuels that's tipping the balance against our children's future. According to James Hansen, a leading climate scientist, carbon dioxide is pouring into the atmosphere at a rate equivalent to exploding 400,000 Hiroshima bombs every day. The gases form a greenhouse blanket around the earth that distorts the balance between solar energy coming in and earth-generated energy escaping from the atmosphere. We're already seeing the consequences in hotter, longer and more frequent heat waves and droughts, fiercer bushfires, harsher winters, wilder storms and flooding, and melting permafrost and glaciers – on one day in 2019, according to Nasa, Arctic glaciers lost an estimated 12½ billion tonnes of ice. That sounds an awful lot to me.

The Antarctic is also carving ice at an alarming rate. The polar glaciers are disappearing six times faster than in 1990, and sea levels are set to rise, some say by three metres, by the year 2100. As one observer put it, "To understand our origins, scientists look to the stars. To understand our demise, the glacier is ground zero." (Dan McDougall)

Expect the new extremes of drought and flooding to slash food crops more often than in the past. Expect more people to suffer malnutrition and starvation. Expect a time when millions more will lack ready access to water.

A world on the brink

So there's our daunting canvas for a spirituality of action and hope, a spirituality that swings our focus away from getting more to being more, and towards embracing the earth in all its diversity. Has our Christian heritage anything useful or distinctive to offer?

I believe it has – as long as we're willing to expand our understanding of religion and spirituality to embrace the new story of creation, the new challenges, the new responsibilities that our new millennium presents.

Religion

For me, the role of religion is central because, properly understood, it touches every aspect of our lives as individuals, societies, and denizens of planet Earth. It's not some kind of spiritual clip-on to so-called "real life" experience, nor even to do with a supernatural dimension to life (though some will insist on seeing it that way). It's something integral to our very being. It joins the rationality of our left-brain *logos* with the imaginative creativity of our right-brain *mythos*. An Italian orientalist and religious historian, Carlo Della Casa, defines religion aptly as "a total mode of the interpreting and living of life."

That total mode obviously begins with our immersion in the material world, and builds from there. We see that clearly in Christianity, for at the heart of Christian faith lies the concept of the Incarnation – that is, God or Godness enfleshed in our human and material world. That means we live within a "divine milieu" (to borrow a phrase from Teilhard de Chardin), which I think of as an active, all-surrounding, constant, force-field of love.

Here there's a marked shift away from the teaching of past centuries, when the church focussed on men and women as essentially souls in need of salvation from sin, and with the ultimate prize everlasting bliss with God in heaven. That doesn't resonate with most of us any more.

The social gospel, important in my own Methodist upbringing, preached to raise ordinary people out of poverty and despair in this life, and give them a new dignity within society. Excellent as far as it went, but missing was concern for the earth on which life pivots. A modern spirituality needs that, but it also needs more.

I'll offer a few starter ideas:

- Open your hearts and minds to "another way of seeing" – beyond the rational, beyond the purely scientific, beyond received economic assumptions, and certainly beyond consumerism.

- Pick up that definition of religion – "a total mode of the interpreting and living of life" – and define your place within it, with emphasis on your <u>total</u> mode of the <u>interpreting</u> and <u>living</u> of life.

- Never think that whatever you can do is too trivial to make a difference. When added to what others are doing, your efforts in recycling, repairing, re-using, rubbish disposal do matter.

- The same goes for buying lots of stuff you don't actually need, so structure your daily living around the economics of enough. Your lifestyle expresses your relation to the earth.

Really? How can your little lifestyle matter when it's the whole world on the brink? Let me quote from a letter by a Sydney-sider that I saw in *The Guardian Weekly. [August 30, 2012]* He was writing about the response to the global financial crisis in the twenty-noughties, but what he says applies equally to our topic today. He says:

"We shake our heads, wag our fingers, and write to letters columns on corporate malfeasance, political corruption and rampant economic self-interest. Yet behind our backs most of us keep our fingers crossed, hoping that our own consumerist contribution won't be the last straw that breaks the camel's back. It's not just the business-as-usual model for industry, banking and the financial sector that's wrong," he says. "It's the life-as-usual expectation of at least six billion of us."

That figure may be a little high, considering that nearly three billion people live on less than $2 a day. But you'll take the point. What **you** do really matters. And it expresses your spirituality.

Of course the scale of the climate crisis demands much more than each of us doing a bit better with our household waste. Government action to curb fossil fuels, protect key environments, penalise pollution, limit population growth, re-orient business towards carbon neutrality – all that and more are urgently needed.

There are mountains of reports and recommendations in this area, but here I want to focus on the positive role that spirituality can play.

The Eco-human

First, and crucially, let's reorient our theological or philosophical approach from being human to being eco-human. This is the bedrock for evolving a new dimension in our spirituality, and so towards a new humanity. Lloyd Geering touched on this when speaking of *The Greening of Christianity:* "Ecological spirituality," he says, "will focus on the nature of our relatedness, not only to one another as humans in human society, but also to all living forms of life in the ecosphere, and to the forces of nature." Relatedness. That's the key word here.

As for a new humanity, isn't that what Christian faith is all about? Traditionally the focus has been on new individuals, their lives inspired by the archetypal Christ of love, grace and transformation, and by a vision of a new society, a society living by the highest values we know, of compassion, justice and love. In Christian shorthand, that's the kingdom of God on earth.

Today, however, a society centred on our relatedness as humans to human society is not enough, and perhaps the supreme calling of the church in this generation is to broaden its vision to give equal emphasis to a spirituality that relates us "to all living forms of life in the ecosphere, and to the forces of nature" (Geering).

In opening ourselves to this, there's wisdom to be drawn from communities who've come close to achieving that in their own environments. A couple of examples, the first from Thomas Berry.

He tells how the Omaha Indians express a human intimacy with the earth through a ceremony embracing both. When a child is born, the Omaha declare its presence to the entire universe. "First," he says, "they address the sun, the moon, the stars, and every being that moves in the heavens, saying: 'Into your midst has come a new life. Consent, we implore! Make its path smooth, that it may reach the brow of the first hill.

"Then the same to the atmospheric world, to the winds, clouds, rain, mist, and all that moves in the air. Then to the hills, valleys, rivers, lakes, trees and grasses.

"Finally: 'You birds, great and small, that fly through the air, you animals, great and small, that dwell in the forest. You insects that creep among the grasses and burrow in the ground. I bid you all to hear me. Consent you all, we implore! Make the path of this new life smooth. Then shall it travel beyond the four hills.'"

That's a different kind of baptism from the one we're familiar with. But I wonder if something of that spirit might be fruitfully incorporated into the church's ritual. Why not?

Te Urewera

But we don't have to go to North America to find such "another way of seeing". In the past decade our own Parliament has taken a huge step into the future, looking backwards – backwards by recognising at last the value of the traditional Maori relationship with land and water, into the future by writing it into two pieces of legislation, with more maybe waiting in the wings.

The Te Urewera Act, passed in 2014, describes the Te Urewera forestland, an area exceeding 2000 square kilometres, as "a fortress of nature, alive with history; its scenery . . . abundant with mystery, adventure, and remote beauty . . . a place of spiritual value, with its own mana and mauri" – a phrase, it says, that conveys the perception of "a living and spiritual force" over the whole forest area.

The act is designed to "establish and preserve in perpetuity a legal and protected status for Te Urewera", including as a place for public use and enjoyment, spiritual reflection, "and as an inspiration for all".

An inspiration. A breathing-in. A living and spiritual force. In legislative terms, something new is happening here.

Whanganui River

Three years later came the Te Awa Tupua Act, which gives the Whanganui River the rights and responsibilities of a legal person. Companies and charities already have that status, so why not? The Act gives the river its own guardian in Te Pou Tupua, two people appointed to speak and act for the river's well-being – just like a legal guardian in loco parentis. One of these is appointed by the Whanganui people, the other by the Crown.

Te Awa Tupua is untranslatable, but it conveys the idea of the whole Whanganui River system, its spirit, and the people related to it, as "an indivisible and living whole … incorporating the river and all of its physical and metaphysical elements." I haven't checked, but I'd guess this is the only place in the New Zealand statutes where you'll find the word "metaphysical".

At the heart of both Acts is the recognition of a Maori relatedness with the natural world. And the way they bring together two deeply divergent traditions, one western and legal, the other ancient and cultural, has excited interest around the world. Perhaps it will happen again one day for Mt Taranaki and the Waikato River. Why not?

New Zealand isn't the only country beginning to re-imagine the human in relation to the rest of nature. One example is Ecuador, which in 2008 wrote into its constitution the rights of nature "to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles". Another is Bolivia, which passed a law in 2010 giving the earth a form of legal personhood. It says: "Mother Earth is the dynamic living system made up of the indivisible community of all living systems, living, interrelated, interdependent and complementary, sharing a common destiny." "A dynamic, living system".

Mauri

As a secular Christian, I see no problem in conceiving of a mauri, a life force, at work in an ocean, a river, a mountain, the forests of Te Urewera – a life force that finds expression in their unique ecologies, a life essence to be respected, a life energy we can live alongside, respond to and enjoy. To Maori that's the mauri, and it's everywhere in the natural world, in birds and animals, the plants in your garden, the soil, each has its own mauri.

Allow that in your thinking, and you'll find yourselves subtly, profoundly, changing the way you relate to an ocean, a river, a mountain, a forest, your pet, your rose garden, your friends, yourself. "An indivisible community of all living systems, . . . sharing a common destiny."

You might ask: Am I trying to sell a new animism? Have I joined those who call for a re-sacralising of nature, reviving old gods or creating new ones after the monotheistic religions swept them away?

Absolutely not. I'm just urging a re-set towards a new balance between us humans and all of nature, not a wholesale flip that would undermine not only the spirit of scientific inquiry that has served us so well, but also our Judaeo-Christian heritage. I shy away from acclaiming Tangaroa as god of the ocean. But how about Tangaroa as symbolising the life force of the ocean?

Christian Re-set

Such a re-set could well broaden one's Christian vision and nudge society forward into a new and deeper relationship with the Earth. What else might help?

Earlier I touched on baptism. Perhaps there's also room for conceiving a new trinity of God (or Godness), Humanity and the Planet, complementing the traditional Godhead of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Why not? Religion must be free to evolve new forms to reflect new realities.

That kind of evolution is already being expressed in new hymns – Colin Gibson has written some excellent ones, Shirley Murray likewise – and also in new liturgies going way beyond a decorative use of natural imagery to genuine theological depth. The Ephesus Group in Wellington has published two or three, including one for midwinter and another drawing on the new story of creation, *Our Universe: Ourselves.*

We need to massage into our theologies that kind of radical re-storying of human/nonhuman relatedness. We need to express it in services of worthship, where we take time out to reflect on what is truly of the highest worth in rituals that lead us into new habits of heart and mind.

Another Way of Seeing

Complement that with private contemplation and you're on to a winner. In a book published early this year called *Sacred Nature,* Karen Armstrong, an English scholar of all religions, offers some suggestions towards a spirituality befitting an eco-human future.

First, she says, take your ego out of the centre of your being. To quote, "Many of us are eager to achieve spiritual enlightenment of some kind, but often we don't realise that this entails the loss of the self that we so busily and inventively preserve and promote." That's also key, of course, to living with compassion.

As to nature, she suggests we begin simply by "looking closely at our immediate environment, making ourselves aware of the magnificence of trees, flowers, birdsong and clouds, until they are no longer just a backdrop to our lives but a daily marvel".

When that's embedded we are ready to steadily expand our consciousness, rippling out to make room for all our fellow-beings, beyond our own ethnicity, our sex, our nationality, our politics, our religion, and our species. We are one in a global world.

These are simple, practical steps towards achieving a new balance between humanity and the wholeness of the natural world – a balance that will spur us, in Thomas Berry's words, to "renew our human participation in the grand liturgy of the universe."

The grand liturgy of the universe. That goes deep.

I've offered a few starter thoughts. What happens next – or doesn't happen next – is over to you.

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