

Jenneke Barton: Green Christianity

A sermon preached at Seekers Church on 3/18/01
by Jenneke Barton

Green Christianity

I am grateful for the willingness and trust you have shown in giving a newcomer the opportunity to share the word this morning. And I'm happy to have this opportunity, first, to talk a bit about what has led to my ecospiritual ministry; then to report briefly on a recent seminar I attended on Christianities as earth faiths; and, finally, to think out loud about ecospirituality at Seekers.

Ever since I was two years old, I have spent long summers (and sometimes more) on the ex-farm my parents bought in rural northeast Vermont. Here, I grew up feeling completely at home with nature and intimate with it. There are places of consolation and spiritual revelation; I made trails in the woods that are used by animals and humans; and its magnificent trees gave me my first understandings of God. Unlike so many people, I have been blessed never to lose that sense of family connectedness to the earth. Gratitude for these blessings eventually led to the call to work for the health of the planet.

When I went away to seminary for the first time fifteen years ago, a fellow student opened our eyes to the intertwined issues of religion and the environment. I lost no time in going to a workshop where I learned that the Bible, if read through "green" lenses, revealed itself as a veritable ecological manual.

Well, I was hooked. I embarked on a massive study program of reading, courses, workshops and trainings; gradually became active in the field, and finally got my M.A. in Applied Theology last May, which involved a six-week church residency in various aspects of ecology and spirituality.

There are two aspects of this huge field that have particularly interested me and that I have chosen to work in. One is exemplified by the work of world change activist, Buddhist and writer Joanna Macy who, along with others, has developed experiential ways of helping people both to grieve the loss of our connection to our earth matrix, and to reclaim that connection. Elisabeth Dearborn and I share this interest and focus in our work.

The other aspect has to do with the fact that although I did not grow up in the church, I did eventually choose to become a Christian after a series of conversion experiences 16 years ago. Soon I seriously began to wonder why the Christian Church's contribution to the environmental movement was so miniscule, given its vast numbers and potential influence and power, as well as the enormous spiritual, moral, ethical, and cultural leadership it could give to the cause. Fortunately, the church has become more environmentally active in recent years, but the alluring challenges posed by my original question still remain: Given the ambiguous history of Christianity's relationship with creation, and the fact that "shoulds", "oughts" and "pushing guilt and blame buttons" are not good motivators for sustained activism, what inspiration and encouragement can Christians find from our heritage? What can we be proud of, and take heart in, as an integral part of being Christian at this critical time for earth? Moreover, what have been the powerful blocks to our awareness of our deep interconnectedness to all that is. What have been the blocks, which, if addressed and healed, could inspire a wholehearted commitment to work on the planet's behalf (including our own)?

Therefore, when I received the announcement of the seminar on “Christianities as Earth Faiths” at Union Theological Seminary in New York, led by distinguished professor, ethicist and writer Larry Rasmussen, I was excited at the prospect of enlarging my understandings about the interface between Christianity and creation. The seminar was about Larry’s sabbatical research trip, which is in the process of becoming a huge research project, with no less a goal than to establish an overarching ethic for the whole earth community! (Moreover, if anyone can pull this off, I think Larry can!)

We explored a number of questions: what expressions of Christianity contribute to sustainable, earth-enhancing ways of living, and how do they do so? What would it mean to make earth’s well-being central to Christian spiritual and moral formation? What can our scriptures reveal about even earlier cosmologies in which human activities, morality and spirituality are integral with the larger earth community? By way of slides, a photography exhibit and talks, we visited six selected and diverse Christian sites in six different countries, where fidelity to God is practiced as fidelity to earth, demonstrating that a wide spectrum of Christian practice can provide bases for Christianity lived as an earth faith. We also explored those communities’ deep, soul-nourishing spiritual traditions for any earth-honoring elements in them, as well as for whatever promise and even hints such communities might offer for solutions to current problems affecting the well-being of the planet.

Larry reminded us that social justice and environmental issues are all negatively affected by accelerated free trade and globalization, which are eroding social justice, a sense of community and spiritual, ethical and moral values. We no longer do our lives in ways that assign much importance to earth except as a resource, and we deny our fundamental place inside – and not superior to – what I like to call the **real** World Wide Web. I am reminded of Deborah Sokolove’s [sermon of](#)

[four weeks ago](#), when she worked with the images of the Body of Christ. Similarly, the earth is a living, breathing body in which each part affects the others: if one part gets out of line, it negatively influences all the others—and this further impact negatively on the first part—in this case, ourselves.

From our armchair visits to the six sites, we became aware that they have certain similarities: a sense of place and of community; worship and responsibilities that reflect intimate human/non-human relations; an insistence that the spiritual and the material are inextricable dimensions of the same reality; and awareness that the Divine presence speaks through all creation. Clearly, Christianity is not solely text-based, but is meaningfully connected to the environment through spirituality and practice.

My favorite example – one that seems to sum it all up – is a new church design, the tri-circular Methodist Church in East Cape Province in Africa. [I held up a diagram of a triangular church composed of three overlapping circles, the space at the center being the altar, or axis mundi – the hub of God – with a big baptismal font full of water close to it. One circle is for people, one for animals and one for plants; the water is there to nourish them all. The circles overlap to signify our interrelatedness; everything that is outside is inside, including God at the center. It is a kind of earth trinity around the Source of all.]

The Hebrew Bible and especially the prophets make it crystal-clear that the earth is Yahweh's; and because creation is dependent on humans treating it with justice and righteousness, land issues are central. The word "land" included not only the biotic entity, but also human institutions and cultures as well as moral and ethical behavior. In Hosea 4:1-3 the prophet declares: "There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore the land mourns,

and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing.”

Environmental and biotic rights are integrally related with human rights. We need only think of waste dumps, polluting factories, poisoned streams, bus depots and incinerators in poor neighborhoods and those of people of color, or the devastating and desecrating effects of globalization on indigenous peoples and their lands. In reflecting on his career, noted theologian and author Juergen Moltmann concluded, “If I could start all over again, I would link my theology with ecological economics. The last two centuries were dominated by economic questions; the next century will be the age of ecology, in which the organism of the earth will become the all-determining factor and will have to be taken into consideration by everyone.”

“Everyone” includes the church as well. Unless it incorporates the non-human natural world – what theologian Sallie McFague calls the “new poor” – into its focus and mission, it is not worshipping God in God’s entirety. Nor can it save souls and bodies without attending to that which supports and nurtures these and provides their very life. Nor can it claim to do the work of justice without addressing the fact that environmental degradation hits the poor, the marginalized, and third world people the hardest: those who can barely manage to survive, let alone think about and nurture the planet.” Larry asked the question, “How do we measure all our religious and moral impulses by the criterion of their contribution to Earth’s care and well-being?”

The church is about healing relationships, and it needs to attend to the wounds of its own estrangement from, and historical abuse of, the earth. This is a very appropriate focus for Lent. To paraphrase today’s reading from Isaiah [55:1-9], we need to seek God where God can be found – that means in all the community of life – and call for God’s

abundant mercy and forgiveness for our sins against it. When Larry's project starts to pour into printed form, we can anticipate detailed discussion of how earth-centered communities like the ones we learned about at the seminar might enrich the way the churches do spiritual/moral/ethic formation in a way consistent with our necessary recognition of earth as "the all-determining factor."

Churches, especially churches like Seekers, are intentional about community. However, community cannot be limited to our building, our worshippers and the people we serve outside; Larry's call is to enlarge our horizons and understand community in a far more inclusive way. Peter said in his [March 4 sermon](#) that, because of little land to be left after reconstruction of Carroll Street, "we will have to go somewhere else to make a difference." Of course, we must do that, and I certainly agree with his statement "the environment that is threatened is not in our back yard" – but if creation is Godly, it also belongs in church.

I understand that there is a lot of environmental awareness and concern at Seekers. How can we become even greener? I have some ideas about that, and I bet you do too.

We need to study the Bible – both testaments – with an ecological lens to mine its earth theology and wisdom, and we need to take a good look at the Canaanite religion and culture that neighbored the early Israelites in the Promised Land. I am hoping there will be a chance to explore these together in a Tuesday night series next season. There are excellent videos around which we could build some evening discussion groups.

In a phone conversation with me about copy for the March Soundings, Kate Cudlipp said, "I think the most important thing is to be aware – even if it's just having our own compost heap!" Well, as serendipity would have it, later that afternoon I was reading an article about earth liturgies and came upon a one-page description of one church's compost bin

dedicating ritual! And the next day I happened to see Muriel Lipp's beautiful poem on the upstairs hall bulletin board, which includes these lines:

*"In the compost of me
my treasures lie... waiting,
enduring the gentling of time
and death's breath/ until fecundity."*

(Talk about being an intimate part of earth!) When I told Kate all this, we solemnly agreed that there might be something going on here!

We might or might not want to go the compost bin route, but there are other ways to be aware. One of the most popular things I did during my M.A. church residency was to read what we came to call an "ecomoment" during every church service: a short, non-biblical message such as a poem or excerpt from a book. I've decided to do this weekly via the all-Seekers email system, and I hope that you too will find these enjoyable and worth pondering.

We can honor the natural materials in our sanctuary. At our March 4 Carroll St. worship, Elisabeth brought bamboo stalks to enrich our surroundings; Peter told us about the making of the cross from his cherry tree slabs; and there was a beautiful rope art piece on the stairwell wall. We have lovely pottery vessels for the communion elements, the blessing of light from candles, and we often enjoy communally the delicious fruits of the earth. To draw attention to, and honor, these gifts of creation could be our own humble way of doing what the tri-circle church is doing: bringing what is sacred out there to join what is sacred in here.

In our seminar, Larry spoke about the importance of studying the earth-based churches' deep traditions for clues: asceticism, sacramentalism, mysticism/contemplation, and prophetic/liberative practices. We might examine our own to

see whether they are good referents to the sacredness of earth. We could encourage each other on our journeys toward intentional voluntary simplicity, the respectful appreciation of all life, and a growing awareness of how we respond to the varied forces and pulls that impact our lives. We might work with Dayspring or Rolling Ridge on earth-honoring retreats. We could be intentional about bringing all of creation into our prayers and meditations.

We might want to reevaluate our liturgies also. Larry reminded us that liturgy is the way a community does its practice; it reflects its operative understandings, hopes and aspirations. Liturgy is not just about expressing beliefs but is a way of becoming those beliefs. If we believe that creation is God-given and God-filled and therefore of supreme value, our liturgies need to reflect that.

The prophets resorted to various attention-getting devices to get their message across. Apparently, Isaiah went around naked doing his ministry – something I never learned in my Old Testament class! Short of our testifying naked en masse at the Tacoma Park metro station – a guaranteed way of getting media, um, exposure, what prophetic acts or projects could we undertake that would, um, embody our commitment to a world of justice for both the human and the more-than-human world?

Our seminar participants had some excellent ideas. Since there is power in numbers and in community, why not undertake a locally based effort with a similarly minded local church or civic group? There may be space at the extreme back of our property for a small community garden where neighborhood children could come and literally “get down” with the soil; plant, water, weed, watch the miracle of growth and blossoming, and learn that the fruits of the earth don’t grow in plastic in the Safeway storeroom. Alternatively, is there a park that needs rejuvenating, something we could take on with our neighbors?

Finally, I would like to see the formation of a small group here at Seekers – it might be the kernel of a future mission group – that would meet regularly to think and study together in order to share with the larger community the specific ways in which we might deepen the green energy that is already bubbling here.

Back in January, on my second Sunday here, I asked Pat to tell me a little about what he thinks makes Seekers special. Along the way, he mentioned that the Carroll St. building has rooms for ministry. It was not long before the thought came to me that those rooms are like new wineskins, and that our transition to our new home is an event of enormous symbolic importance: a time of new visions, new challenges and new growth. Maybe we can put a heightened earth ministry into one of those wineskins. It is my hope that when we finally go to our new and larger home, we will do so with the call to expand our own horizons to encompass the entire and precious community of God's creation.