

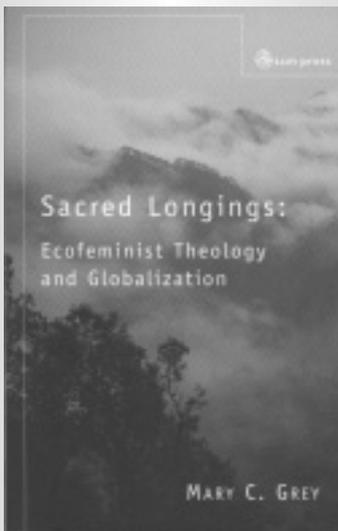
In Search of Christian Ecological Roots

– as the crisis deepens

by Mary Grey

Mary Grey insists that Ecological Theology, or Green Christianity, is not driven by politics but emerges from ‘a conviction that our deepest faith sources, the Bible and the Jewish and Christian traditions, far from encouraging domination of the earth, offer both correctives to human greed and unethical lifestyles’. She goes on to show how those same sources are the inspiration of imaginative visions of peaceful and just living inclusive of human and non-human life, through the recovery of active religious faith.

A two-fold task faces us: we need a reconversion to an inspirational, robust creation theology ... and to transform our lifestyles.



Mary Grey's latest book *Sacred Longings: Ecofeminist Theology and Globalization* is published by SCM Press.

There will be a review in the next issue of *Green Christian*.

Never have we known such a summer – in terms of human and ecological misery. Those sceptical of global warming warnings have at last been forced to re-consider, as hurricane after hurricane battered Florida, and the sight of devastation has become all too familiar. We are confronted, too, with the plight of Haiti, not only with the tragedy of more than one thousand people drowned, and thousands homeless, but with the inescapable link with the fact that Haiti's forest cover has been reduced to 5%. The message is clear. The denial of many years has been overtaken by a mixture of anger, fear, resignation, but not yet with the international political will to take the necessary effective action.

And we ecologically-concerned Christians – what is our response? Our commitment to political campaigning has rightly – and encouragingly – increased, and hopefully, will become steadily more effective, as Christian belief in the future is understood as being inextricably bound up with the planet's very survival. “Live simply”, the late Canon Horace Dammers of the *Lifestyle Movement* proclaimed, “that others may simply live”. *Others* is now inclusive of the non-human other – creatures, trees and all life forms.

Yet Ecological Theology – or Green Christianity – first emerged, not from politics, but from a conviction that our deepest faith sources, the Bible and Jewish and Christian traditions, far from encouraging domination and (mis-interpreted) dominion of the earth, offer both correctives to human greed and unethical lifestyles, and imaginative visions of peaceful and just living, inclusive of human and non-human life, through the

recovery of what is now almost a lost dimension to western contemporary society – active religious faith. *Let us then re-read the Bible with different eyes – an urgent cry that comes also from the Nobel Prize winner Professor Wangeri Maathai, founder of the Green Belt movement – so as to liberate these dimensions.*

A two-fold task faces us: firstly we need a reconversion to an inspirational, robust creation theology before there is any hope of making any impact on our secular neighbours (often better ecologists!), or that society in general will undergo a change of heart. Secondly, on the basis of this, we need to transform our lifestyles. *But the second is dependent on the radical nature of the first.* For Ecological Theology absolutely nothing is more fundamental than the conviction that the world is created and held in existence by God's love, compassion and providence – God's love for all creatures and forms of life. The Spirit of this Trinitarian God, incarnate in Jesus Christ (but not exclusively), is encountered in thousands of ways in the Divine gift economy. It may be mind-bogglingly difficult to hold to this insight amidst flood, hurricane, drought and famine, and harder still to defend it in the face of both rationalistic humanism and exaggerated individualism: but the first step is to believe it with heart and mind, and experience this faith as guiding star.

So, what are the obstacles to this reconversion? Lay aside, momentarily, the historical processes whereby our focus became anthropocentric to the point where we lost an authentic relationship with the earth, considering nature either as something to be controlled, dominated at worst, or at best used for our advantage. But remain conscious of what undergirded this, namely a dualistic heritage, whereby nature – along with women, animals, matter and physicality – became the dark underside of all that was characteristic of “civilisation”, such as de-natured culture, progress, the superiority of reason, and the triumph of patriarchy.

Let us critically re-read our biblical and theological heritage, in repentance from a culture idolising money, the life-style it brings, and the way it determines identity (or the lack of it). Critically reclaiming our heritage does not imply that our biblical ancestors were free from these dualisms: even if their ecological footprint was many times lighter than ours. The temptations of greed, ambition and misuse of land were all too overpowering. Time and again the suffering voice of the Creator is heard, through the prophets, recalling the people to God's vision of shalom and justice. Can we hear this voice again?

For many Christians the Creation story begins and ends with Genesis. This immediately confronts us with the Fall, and the question of how and whether the whole of nature suffers from the effects of human sin. A more inspirational way into our story is through the book of Isaiah, covering the period of the conquest of the Jews by the Persian empire, exile in Babylon and return to Judah, and starting again (535BCE). Isaiah links with our current situation in showing us that we always begin *from the broken web*¹ of ravaged creation. He, like all the prophets, connects devastation of the land with human sin and responsibility. He, more than anyone, appeals to the people through his imaginative vision of shalom that embraces flourishing of people, land, and animals. Water springs up in the desert with a diversity of trees (Is.39). Lion, lamb, panther and kid feed together in this messianic vision of redeemed creation (Is.11). Whether this means a vision of messianic times – the Jewish interpretation – or a prophetic dream of what might be, it nonetheless calls us into something radically different from limited human imaginings.

The radical otherness of God's vision for creation is also revealed in the book of Job. Here, in chapters 38 to 41 we are given magnificent poetry and a cosmology radically different from that found in the normal reading of the book of Genesis². As opposed to apparently being the summit of creation, humanity is toppled from pride of place and placed alongside the animals and humbler forms of life. Radically different views of freedom, justice, the wisdom of creation and the gratuitousness of God's love are presented. This is no Walt Disney view of creation: its wildness, savagery and ambiguity are poured out before our eyes³. Where human beings have looked to conquering the land and taming the wilderness, God, who displays intimate knowledge of the ways of birds, gives us the image of the baby vultures being taught to drink the blood of their prey, and a place for the monsters of the deep. Dissonance is revealed, not only in the text, but also in reality. Otherness, strangeness and the savagery of animals seems to be part of God's creation. All things may be connected – but not in the comforting way sometimes presumed by romanticists! Not that the savagery and ambiguities of creation are any consolation to those threatened by earthquake, flood and drought: but a word of warning is given to us. In the powers we human beings now have at our disposal to destroy the

world with nuclear bombs, to clone human beings, to manipulate the genetic structures of the plant and animal world, we have taken God's role and challenged God's control of creation. Yet God's words to Job are clear:

Have you commanded the morning? (38.12)
Have you entered the storehouses of the snow?
(38.22)

The seemingly imperious tones of God recall humanity to a proper sense of humility and place. This God gives new responsibilities in the current threatened situation of creation: a call to respect wildness and the needs of wild animals, not to hunt them to extinction, and an urgent imperative to hear the cries of the victims whose land has turned to desert because of the unjust policies of governments or corporations. The God of Job calls from the whirlwind that we respect the total ecology of place: *ecological* rather than *exclusively economic* objectives must be our priorities.

So, from Biblical roots the conversion needed is to a radical humility, a sense of responsibility and an awareness of limit. The framework within which this is given is that of covenant – God's covenant with the whole of the cosmos. From the covenant with Noah (Genesis 9), to its constant renewals, and the role of the king in expressing this on behalf of the community⁴, to its renewal in Jesus' Last Supper, covenant is a profound summons to understand our authentic role in the cosmos. Responding to this, rather than considering ourselves stewards of creation – a model that can fuel our arrogance and anthropocentrism – may yet bring hope to battered creation.

Speaking within this covenant and within the tradition of the Jubilee laws, calling for justice for the land, Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed his own mission of liberation (Luke 4.18-30). Two thousand years later liberation theologians would rediscover the profundity of this mission and its promise for their own times of oppression. Still later eco-theologians like Leonardo Boff and Sallie McFague would call for the inclusion of the earth herself within the vision of liberation⁵. Liberation Theology recovers God's focus on the most poor and vulnerable beings of the world – and now the earth herself is the new category of poverty. Ethicists like Michael Northcott and Celia Deane-Drummond see promise in the way that both the natural law tradition and the virtue ethics of Thomas

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¹ This is the title of Catherine Keller's book, *From a Broken Web: Sin, Separation and the Self* (Boston: Beacon 1986).

² M. Grey, *Sacred Longings: Ecofeminist Theology and Globalisation* (London: SCM 2003), Chapter 7.

³ See Bill McKibben, *The Comforting Whirlwind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1994).

⁴ See Robert Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant* (London: Sheed and Ward 1992).

⁵ Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation – a new Paradigm* (Maryknoll: Orbis 1995); Sallie McFague: *The Body of God* (London: SCM 1993).