



## KAIROS Backgrounder

# Sustainability: Embodying an Ecological Worldview

by Dorothy McDougall  
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On the planet earth, all living things are clearly derived from a single origin. We are literally born as a community; the trees, the birds, and all living creatures are bonded together in a single community of life...Community is not something that we dream up or think would be nice. Literally, we are a single community. The planet earth is a single community of existence, and we exist in this context.<sup>1</sup>

Today the word “sustainability” can be heard on the lips of economists, environmentalists, politicians, and industrialists alike. Does “sustainability” mean the same thing to all of them? When economists talk about sustainable growth they are usually referring to the continued and steady growth of country economies; environmentalists refer to keeping within the ability of nature’s resources to replenish themselves; politicians are concerned about the management of resources and the long-term protection of the expansion of their economies; industrialists worry about the viability of their enterprise in the face of dwindling resources. These notions do not necessarily reflect an ecological worldview that is consistent with the communal reality that is life on earth. In these views, sustainability is a function of human enterprise, rather than a relational way of being in the world.

In an ecological worldview, sustainability needs to be concerned for the long-term viability of the “other.” Sustainability calls us to use only what we need for life and to leave space for the other. It is a call to live justly on a fragile and limited planet. In the Global North, it means de-growth, not growth. It means that we must die to ourselves so that others might live. In the Global South, it means that the marginalized get fed first. It means that human enterprise respects the right for all other species to flourish and to sustain themselves. Sustainability as a way of life means that limits to economic growth act as a challenge to humanity’s capacity for egocentrism. In this light it is a spiritual exercise and a theological principle that underpins Jesus’ call to reconciliation and healing with and among all who dwell on this earth.

### **The Global Religious Context**

Today, the world is in a state of ecological crisis. More than any other issue climate change is bringing this reality to our television screens nightly as we watch the devastating impacts of hurricanes, tsunamis, drought, flooding, glacial meltdowns, sea level rise, disappearing lands and sinking islands. Since industrialization, there has arisen a kind of cultural “autism” that prevents the euro-western world from coming to terms with the magnitude of the ecological crisis we are now facing. In November 1997 a special edition of *Time* entitled *Our Precious Planet* named it as the next century’s biggest challenge, yet twelve years later we are further behind in addressing the issues that are contributing to an increase in mass suffering and may very possibly lead to our own extinction. This paper asks the question why? What lies at the heart of such denial? What

needs to occur if we are to come to grips with reality? What is the way out of the morass that we seem to be in?

This paper first outlines the global context and the emergent issues that need our attention. Second it suggests that the ecological crisis is at its heart a crisis of *meaning* in the western world and offers an alternative worldview that may help us to re-focus our energies towards recovery. This worldview describes a re-discovery of an ancient wisdom that places humanity within the context of the earth community rather than over and above other life forms sharing existence with us. From a Christian perspective, this will take us beyond the managerial or stewardship model to a relational perspective that is based on sustainability, reconciliation and healing. It will call us to announce that the reign of God is measured by God's love for the whole world and that its inauguration depends on our ability to mirror that same kind of love. (John 3:16)

### **Climate Change – Climate Crisis**

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), comprised of two hundred of the world's leading scientists on climate change warns of the world-wide devastating impacts of climate change and makes it clear that the causes are the result of anthropogenic activity.<sup>2</sup> It writes:

Changes in atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases (GHGs) and aerosols, land-cover and solar radiation alter the energy balance of the climate system. Global GHG emissions due to human activities have grown since pre-industrial times, with an increase of 70% between 1970 and 2004.<sup>3</sup>

In many parts of the world, drought is causing untold suffering for millions. IRIN writes: "In Nepal, rainfall has become erratic, and winters have become drier in recent years. Last year, there was less rain than usual during the mid-year monsoon season, and the country also experienced a severe winter drought, which stretched into 2009 - which meant not much water was stored."<sup>4</sup> In January 2009 the government of Kenya declared a national emergency after harvests failed and resulted in food shortages for over ten million people there.<sup>5</sup> The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) has declared that at least 25% of global food production could be lost by 2050.<sup>6</sup> Climate change has also contributed to the surge in malaria cases in the highlands of east Africa.<sup>7</sup>

Some in the Global North may think that this is only happening somewhere else. However, in Canada extreme weather conditions in various regions are increasing; fires in British Columbia are more widespread<sup>8</sup>, flooding in Manitoba is predicted to increase in both frequency and severity<sup>9</sup> while the devastation of the Boreal Forest in British Columbia by the pine beetle is threatening to move eastward.<sup>10</sup> In April, 2008 the CBC's Paul Jay did a story outlining the devastating implications of the pine beetle infestation. He writes that "the mountain pine beetles are expected to wipe out 80 per cent of B.C.'s pine forest by 2013" and attributes the invasion both to forest management practices and climate change.<sup>11</sup> In February 2009, Steven Chu, US energy secretary warned that California's agriculture could actually be eliminated by the end of the century because of water shortages.<sup>12</sup>

Arctic communities as well are experiencing many devastating effects of climate change as the ecosystem around them gives way to rapid change. For instance, according to Steve Solomon, a

Canadian government coastal geologist in Tuktoyaktuk, “warming ocean waters are undercutting the cliffs' permafrost base [and]...at current erosion rates — and they may worsen as warming does — the island will be reduced to a small shoal in 30 or 40 years, exposing the unprotected side of Tuk's populated peninsula to ocean waves.”<sup>13</sup> Prince Edward Island as other coastal islands around the world, are extremely vulnerable to climate change. A recent study by the Government of Canada predicts an increase in the frequency and extent of flooding in Charlottetown caused by storm surges, a decrease in sea ice, and a probable increase in rates of shore erosion on PEI's north shore all with devastating impacts on island life.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, while climate change knows no boundaries, the world climate crisis is not uniform in its immediate impacts. The fact remains that the countries in the Global South are presently feeling the brunt of climate change in species loss, ecosystem destruction, agricultural disturbance, social upheaval, and economic disparity. And, it is the countries in the Global North who are responsible for 80% of GHG emissions derived mostly from the burning of fossil fuels to feed their consumer-based economies by way of more cars, larger homes, exotic foods, and the infrastructure constructed to support western-style lifestyles. This makes climate change not only a survival issue, but a justice issue as well. It is said that if everyone in the world consumed in the same manner as those in the Global North it would take three planets to sustain human life. However, we do not have three planets on which to live. We have only one – Earth, which is fast becoming unlivable for vast populations of inhabitants, both human and nonhuman. Therefore it is imperative that we humans, especially those of us living in the Global North, reconsider our self-identity as consumers and how we choose to live on Earth. This is truly a *kairos* moment in the history of Western civilization – one that has the capacity to reorient Western consciousness to the earth and so to ecological wholeness.

### **The Ecological Crisis as a Crisis of Meaning**

The influence of thought and philosophy developing and emerging in 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe, combined with the industrial and scientific revolution marked a major turning point in human history. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, with the advent of industrialization and the collapse of the feudal system there emerged a hierarchy of capital and labor in which capital held sway over human labor and its connection to land. At the same time, Francis Bacon, considered to be the “father of the scientific method held that empirical knowledge – knowledge based on observation under laboratory conditions – yielded the purest truth about nature. According to feminist theologian, Rosemary Radford Reuther:

Bacon's thought is pervaded by images of nature as a female to be coerced, “penetrated,” conquered, and forced to “yield,” ... while the scientist is imaged as the epitome of masculine power over such “feminine” nature.<sup>15</sup>

Bacon equated scientific knowledge with the capacity to “subjugate and rule over ‘nature’.”<sup>16</sup> Further, an influential philosopher of the time René Descartes advanced a view of rational thinking that reflected a dualism between mind and body, which posited the thinking mind as superior to matter. The result was an elevation of scientific truth and a radical denigration of material reality itself.<sup>17</sup> A generation later, Isaac Newton put forward a mechanical universe where matter was simply atomic particles moving in space according to the laws of force and gravity. God was the “clock-maker” who existed outside the realm of space and time and

intervened only from time to time when warranted. The material world was devoid of spirit. Radford Reuther writes:

Newtonian physics was the paradigm of the new mechanical universe, which could be reduced to “resources” and appropriated as power and wealth by the new ruling elites of Europe.... This left the mechanical model of the universe in firm control of science up to the present time.<sup>18</sup>

This mechanistic view of the world was accompanied by a European expansionist agenda that resulted in the colonization and exploitation of indigenous lands and peoples in Asia, Africa and the Americas and tragically reshaped the contours of both human and nonhuman populations and systems in these countries. Having depleted the regions in this way, the peoples’ survival became perversely dependent on the “the colonizing nations whose “development” they had financed through the exploitation of their lands and labor.”<sup>19</sup> The scriptural description of human identity in relationship to being made in God’s image (Gen. 1:27) coupled with the mandate to have dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:28) added to the justification for unfettered industrial pursuit and limitless expansion.<sup>20</sup> The combination of these influences together contributed dramatically to a rethinking of human identity in Euro-Western culture.

The modern world came to see humans as separate from the rest of the world and able to control the forces of nature. Positively, this historical moment freed humanity from the chains of helpless destiny and fated circumstance. It led to many innovations in medicine, science and technology, greater wealth and the rise of the middle class, and many human conveniences. Negatively, it portrayed earth merely as an environment to be exploited for human gain, and contributed to widespread ecological ruin and the growing divide between wealth and poverty, especially in areas of the world where the exploitation of resources only benefit middle-class and elite consumption.

Today, in the market-oriented economy that has grown out of this history, human identity has become conflated with consumer-identity. Corporations and governments alike target their appeals to a constituency of consumers rather than to a community of citizens and address the natural world in terms of commodification rather than as living beings within living ecosystems. This severance of the human from the rest of creation has marked a deep spiritual shift in the Western world that posits human meaning in the accumulation of goods and apparent financial “success.” However, evidence from the devastating effects of ecological ravage and climate change suggests that this model of human identity is reaching its own limits and that it is time to reassess our human commitment to it. This is not only an economic and political quest, this is most deeply a spiritual and theological one.

### **An Ecological Worldview as a Path to Recovery**

Euro-Western consciousness emerging from the 17<sup>th</sup> century assumes no limits in its pursuit of economic goals. However, this vision of reality is flawed from the outset. From earliest times, humans have realized their dependance on earth’s sustenance. Ancient religious and cultural traditions have stressed humanity’s kinship with the rest of the created world and viewed human limits within a context of competing life forces. They valued reciprocity and mutual enhancement of the whole earth community. Indigenous peoples knew that survival depended on right relationships within an interconnected web of familial relations. This is not to say that

Indigenous peoples always stayed within the bounds of this framework, but it is to say that on the whole this belief has been carried forward throughout their history and remains a focus for many still today. Their relationship to the earth is considered to be central to their Indigenous identity.

While the origins of Christianity are focussed on human well-being, there is a strong tradition that places human well-being within the context of God's covenant with the whole of creation.<sup>21</sup> Questions about our origins both in scripture and tradition have been answered in connection to our relationship to God. Many theologians say that the dominion motif has been misinterpreted and that the more authentic scriptural image is one of humanity as gardener/caretaker and steward of a creation that belongs to God alone.<sup>22</sup> Others would say that stewardship still assumes a certain superiority and separateness over the natural world that flies in the face of the last five hundred years of history. Discussions about whether humans are caretakers of God's creation miss the point altogether. This discussion is more concerned with the *I-Thou* relationship between humans and God, rather than between humans and the rest of the world.

An ecological worldview invites us to think about human identity *within* an unfolding cosmos. It invites us to situate our sacred story not only within the last five thousand years of human history, but within fifteen billion years of cosmic history. It is here that we will discover how "all things are interrelated and interdependent in both macro and micro ways...It is a story in which we human beings are...imbedded in, the products of, the earth and its evolution."<sup>23</sup> We not only share a common origin with everything else, we all share the same DNA, the building blocks of life. We cannot exist apart from our earth history and we cannot create a future apart from it either.

Where is God in this sacred story? How do we account for Christian experience that reveals a God that is for us – a God that is involved with human history? Some theologians like Sallie McFague posit that Christianity has too long been concerned with God's omnipotence rather than God's omnipresence. She writes:

I will suggest that the traditional creation-providence story...has underscored God's power over divine love, God's transcendence over divine immanence, God's distance from the world over God's involvement in it...An incarnational context for understanding the God-world relationship has implications for our response to climate change. *It means that we and God are in the same place and that we share responsibility for the world.*<sup>24</sup>

An ecological worldview means that we are all connected – God, humans, and other-than-humans. We are all in this together. For Christians in this worldview, Jesus' command "to love one another as I have loved you" takes on a deeper meaning. It expands our notion of "who is my neighbour?" and calls us to consider the well-being of the whole earth community as we make political and economic decisions about how we are to live in the world.

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*KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives unites eleven churches and religious institutions in work for social justice in Canada and around the globe.*

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Dunn and Anne Lonergan ed. *Befriending the Earth: A Theology of Reconciliation Between Humans and the Earth: Thomas Berry and Thomas Clarke*, Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> See *Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report*. A Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change published by UNEP in preparation for the UN climate change talks in Bali, November 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Introduction, p.4of 23.

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=86273>. (Accessed on October 14, 2009.)

<sup>5</sup> Ian Angus, *Not a Distant Prospect* in *The Global Fight for Climate Justice: Anticapitalist Responses to Global Warming and Environmental Destruction*, London: Resistance Books, 2009. p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 20.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> See David Suzuki report: [http://www.davidsuzuki.org/Forests/Forests\\_101/FIRE/Climate\\_Change.asp](http://www.davidsuzuki.org/Forests/Forests_101/FIRE/Climate_Change.asp). (Accessed October 13, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> See the Government of Manitoba's website: [http://www.gov.mb.ca/stem/climate/climate\\_effect.html](http://www.gov.mb.ca/stem/climate/climate_effect.html) (Accessed October 13, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Copy of the CBC report can be accessed at <http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/science/beetle.html>. (Accessed on October 13, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> *Not a Distant Fight*, p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> See Associated Press story by Charles J. Hanley at [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/32734325/ns/us\\_news-environment/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/32734325/ns/us_news-environment/). (Accessed on October 13, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> See Government of Canada website: [http://www.atl.ec.gc.ca/press/01-09-06c\\_back.html](http://www.atl.ec.gc.ca/press/01-09-06c_back.html). (Accessed October 13, 2009.)

<sup>15</sup> Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*, San Francisco: Harper, 1992, p.195. The issue regarding the connection between the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of women is not a subject of this paper. However, many ecofeminist scholars have made these links and for a fuller understanding Radford Reuther serves as a good introduction. For further resources on this issue see bibliography under section *Ecology and Feminism* in Dorothy McDougall, *The Cosmos as the Primary Sacrament*, New York: Peter Lang: 2003.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 196

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.197.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 199

<sup>20</sup> While the history of this relationship is complex, most theologians agree that scripture and Christian thought are related to the way western culture in this period shifted human consciousness away from the earth and toward the centrality of human occupation.

<sup>21</sup> See Diane Jacobsson, "Biblical Bases for Eco-justice Ethics in *Theology for an Earth Community*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel, New York: Orbis, 1996.

<sup>22</sup> For a deeper understanding see the work of theologians such as Douglas Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship*, New York: Friendship Press, 1986; Walter Brueggeman, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977.

<sup>23</sup> Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 63.