

# ECOLOGIZATION OF ESCHATOLOGY: AN ECOTHEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN LONGING AND FULFILLMENT

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## I. *Introduction*

The Christian anthropological assumption underlying the question of human longing and fulfillment, as discussed in this essay, is that the individuals as subjects actualizes themselves in communion with God, with other human beings and with the cosmos. All the three dimensions — personal, social and cosmic — are integral to the question. However, the primary focus of this essay will be on the cosmic or ecological dimension of human fulfillment. This is because our planet earth is heading toward an ecological catastrophe with the distinct possibility of the total annihilation of humankind as well as of all life forms. In the given situation it will not make much sense to talk about human longing and fulfillment in terms of personal salvation or the salvation of the human race. Hence, the main argument of this essay is that, in the context of the impending ecological crisis and the consequent threat of total annihilation of all life on earth, any responsible Christian discourse on human fulfillment should include the longing and fulfillment of the whole creation.

## II. *Dialectic of Human Fulfillment and the non-Fulfillment of Creation*

The longing of creation for fulfillment and the actual experience of non-fulfillment provides the context of our discussion. On the one hand, the biblical witness, as evidenced in St. Paul's letter to the Romans, speaks about the groaning of creation for fulfillment. According to Paul, it is not only human beings but also the whole created order longs for liberation from decay (Rom. 8: 19–22). That is to say, the entire creation, together with the humankind, shares the promise of a definitive fulfillment. The book of Revelation reiterates this hope of the renewal of all things and the transformation of the present order into a new heaven and new earth, and, thereby signals the common

destiny of all (Rev. 21: 1, 5). On the other hand, a casual look at the ecological situation today sufficiently indicates that the reality is far from the hope generated by the biblical vision of the wholeness of creation. In fact, the travail of nature, the groaning of creation is assuming the proportion of a death pang.

Perhaps, the positive experience of the planet and the mistaken confidence in the earth's sustainability are contributing to our insensitivity toward nature. Our experience of the earth is characterized by an admixture of beauty and ugliness. We experience the beauty as we encounter the mountains, rivers, valleys, lakes, snow-capped mountains, forests, animals, plants, flowers, insects, and various life forms. The bounty of the earth is experienced in the natural resources such as water, air, fossil fuel, minerals, etc. and this experience of the beauty and bountifulness of our planet leads us to believe that all is well with the earth and it has an infinite capacity to sustain life. Hence, we are unwilling to admit that we are heading toward an ecological disaster, though we are aware of the ugly or disfigured face of our planet as evidenced in the pollution and destruction of the biosphere. In stead, we wish to think that the disfigurement is only superficial and that it can be rectified by cosmetic measures. It is a colossal mistake. For the ugliness of the planet is only the tip of the ice berg; it is only a sign of a deep-seated ecological crisis both at the global and regional levels.

Scientists in various fields have convincingly shown us that the world is heading toward a catastrophe, a disaster that is not imposed from outside; but caused by human instrumentality. For instance, India's population has crossed one billion in May 2000. It has adverse effect on all levels of the biotic community in this country. The population pressure on the land is causing migration of rural people to the urban centers. Our cities are overcrowded forcing people to live in sub-human conditions. The atmospheric pollution in the mega-cities like Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai and other cities and towns all over the country has reached dangerous proportions. The air pollution alone causes the death of more than 40,000 people a year in India. The industrial waste and human waste are polluting India's major rivers such as Yamuna, Ganges, Narmada and other water sources. Deforestation is causing erratic climate changes resulting in reduced rainfall and rise in temperature. Connected with deforestation are the problems of top soil erosion, receding water tables and draughts. The wanton destruction of the biosphere endangers animal, plant and marine life as well.

India is only one instance of what is happening globally. The indiscriminate exploitation of the natural resources, scant attention paid to the environmental pollution, the population growth, genetic manipulation, and, the ozone depletion, acid rains, and green house effect altar the ecological balance causing, among other things, the extinction of numerous species a year. This convincingly shows the decreasing ability of the biosphere to sustain life on

earth. The world of humanity is not adequately conscious of the fact that the situation is irreversible, and that the most we can do is to stop inflicting further damage to the biosphere. As a result, we focus on the short term benefits that can accrue from the economic development and progress paying scant attention to the needs of the biosphere. Our myopic vision prevents us from seeing that even if we succeed in indefinitely prolonging physical life through genetic engineering, in the last instance, such achievements are futile, if the biosphere itself fails to sustain life forms on earth.

The obvious conclusion is that the non-fulfillment of creation is the greatest threat to the human longing and fulfillment. Conversely, the insatiable desire to actualize human longing stands as the primary cause of the non-fulfillment of creation. That is to say, the exclusive focus on human fulfillment and the non-fulfillment of the creation are mutually related. This being the case, the question is how are we to conceive the Christian notion of human fulfillment that would incorporate the vision of a cosmic fulfillment in its understanding? Before we address this issue, it is necessary to establish whether there is a link between the Christian notion of human fulfillment and the present ecological crisis. Hence a brief analysis is in place.

### III. *Christian Notion of Fulfillment and the Ecological Crisis*

Christianity is essentially a religion of salvation or fulfillment. This need not necessarily be a problem. However, the way Christianity, as a soteriological religion, has conceived salvation and fulfillment is not above suspicion. Some scholars place the burden of the contemporary ecological crisis on Christianity and its specific soteriology. The classic example is Lynn White, a historian and a philosopher, who accused Christianity of being the root cause of the present ecological crisis, and asserted that Christianity is ecologically bankrupt.<sup>1</sup> His statement generated impassioned debate among ecologists that helped to deepen the understanding of the relationship between Christianity and ecology. Besides, it also provided the much needed clarification regarding the questions whether the accusation against Christianity is justified; and whether Christianity is ecologically bankrupt.

1 White, L.. (1967), 1203-7. For a discussion on the impact of White's article, Cfr. McAfee (1996), 31-44.

#### IV. *World Negation in Christianity and the Ecological Crisis*

Christianity is ambiguous in its attitude to nature. The ambiguity consists in the simultaneous presence of a world-affirming and world-negating attitude in its worldview from the beginning.<sup>2</sup> However, a decisive change in favor of the negation of the world occurred in the Middle Ages. According to Thomas Berry, the attitude of Christians toward the world began to change with the experience of the Black Death in Europe.<sup>3</sup> Two thirds of the population in Europe was decimated between 1347–49. In the absence of proper scientific and medical knowledge, the plague was explained in terms of divine causality, as God's punishment of a wicked world. The experience of the Black Death impressed upon the minds of the people the fragility of human life and the insignificance of the worldly existence. The corresponding spirituality and theology that emerged, emphasized repentance and withdrawal from the world, and disengagement from worldly concerns. This led to the radical alienation of the peoples from the natural world. Accordingly, human longing and fulfillment were conceived as having nothing to do with the cosmos. Moreover, the world was seen as an obstacle to human fulfillment. Berry locates, in this process, the valorization of a world-negating attitude in Christianity.

Further, philosophical ideas and development in science and technology contributed to the alienation of human beings from nature. Descartes' radical division between mind and body, Newton's inert mechanistic view of the physical world, and Bacon's manipulative scientific domination of nature have transformed the world and nature into an object.<sup>4</sup> As a consequence, the earth became a material thing to be conquered, controlled, exploited and used for human fulfillment. The technological development facilitated human mastery over nature.

Christianity provided the necessary theological justification for the exploitation of nature. The anthropocentric interpretation of the creation story legitimized the domination and subjugation of the earth. The emphasis on human history, rather than nature, as the locus of the primordial divine presence and revelation, left hardly any room for God in the world. Moreover, the

2 Santmire has judiciously analyzed this ambiguity using the spiritual and ecological motifs. The spiritual motif refers to the Christian tradition's preoccupation with the other-world at the expense of nature, while the ecological motif refers to the vision of nature as intrinsic to the salvific plan of God. According to Santmire, the spiritual motif predominated the Christian tradition. See Santmire (1985).

3 Berry (2000), 127–134.

4 Cowdin (2000), 265. An analysis of the feminist critique of this development is found in Hill (1998), 219–221.

focus on the transcendent nature of God and a corresponding neglect of God's immanence transformed the world into a Godless world. As a result, God was radically removed from the world, and the world without God became an object of human exploitation. Berry says, "Science and technology took over and exploited the planet because religious persons have abandoned it."<sup>5</sup>

Thus, historically the alliance between Christianity and science, approximately for the past 500 years, has been instrumental for people's loss of a sense of relatedness to the natural world. While science provided the technological means for the subjugation of the earth, religion and philosophy furnished its ideological justification. It is from this perspective that Lynn White and others implicate Christianity for the present ecological crisis. There is some justification for their criticism. However, their accusation that Christianity is inherently anti-ecological betrays an inadequate understanding of the history of the Christian tradition. For, as Elizabeth Johnson says, it is only in the last quarter of the 2000 years of Christianity that it lost touch with nature/creation.<sup>6</sup> Hence, White's criticism is applicable only to some phases in the development of the Christian tradition and not to the whole of it.

### *V. Ecological Bankruptcy of Christianity?*

To respond to this issue, we need to briefly review the first 1500 years of Christian history. Theologians like Santmire<sup>7</sup>, Johnson<sup>8</sup>, Neuhaus<sup>9</sup> and others have argued that Christianity does not necessarily enshrine an anti-earth attitude. Even though it does not score high in its earth-affirming attitude, Christian tradition contains rich sources of unexplored potential for responding to the ecological crises confronting us. Johnson, for example, argues that Christianity inherited the theological orientation of the Jewish tradition of seeing God as related to the world and human beings. The Christian notion of the incarnation establishes an intimate link between God and the world. The doctrine of the resurrection of the body affirms the intrinsic worth of the material creation. The Christian eucharist incorporates the whole creation into the worship of the Christian community and, thereby, affirms the goodness of material creation. Santmire demonstrates that the Fathers of the church, Irenaeus and Augustine discerned and affirmed the value of creation

5 Berry (2000), 130.

6 Johnson, (2000), 17.

7 Santmire (1985).

8 Johnson (2000), 5-11.

9 Neuhaus (1997), 20-25.

in the plan of God. In the 12th and 13th centuries Thomas Aquinas, Boneventure, and Francis Assisi acknowledged the significance of creation in relation to God. Luther and Calvin in the 16th century and, Karl Barth and Teilhard de Chardin in the 20th century asserted the importance of creation. However, Santmire clearly highlights the ambiguity of Christian tradition with regard to nature. He shows that except Ireneas, the mature Augustine and Francis of Assisi, the others did not accord any ultimate significance to nature since they saw fulfillment only in terms of spiritual, other-worldly salvation of human beings. And this continues to be the prevalent attitude even today.

This brief overview shows the ambiguous nature of the Christian tradition with regard to nature, as well as the possibility of finding resources for addressing the ecological problems of today. However, these resources lay submerged under the predominantly world negating theological assumptions enshrined in the Christian tradition and which gained greater visibility and acceptance since some 500 years ago. In order to rediscover and creatively utilize the ecologically valuable elements, it is necessary for theology to effect a radical change in its currently operating paradigm. Without a paradigm shift in its vision of human longing and fulfillment, Christian religion will continue to be a threat to the earth.

## VI. *Inadequacy of Current Theological Paradigm*

The traditional theological paradigm visualized a transcendent God above and beyond the cosmic process who was concerned only with human beings and their salvation. The creation of the universe was understood as a preparation for the creation of human beings and once human beings appeared on the scene, the cosmos became a stage for the drama in which the only actors were human beings and God. The Fall of human beings, the *felix culpa*, initiated the process of the incarnation of the transcendent God in the person of Jesus. The incarnate Word, through his passion, death and resurrection, accomplished human redemption. The redemption as seen from this theological paradigm was essentially an otherworldly salvation of human persons. This world was the valley of tears through which human beings had to travel to reach their eternal home which is heaven. The function of the church was to assist people in their journey. The Spirit strengthened the believers to go ahead; the sacraments provided the necessary food for the journey. Fundamentally, this theological paradigm negates the intrinsic value of the material universe. It essentially leads to the denial of the earth and the role of human beings in the cosmos.

Central to this theological paradigm are the notions of hierarchy and dualism. Reality is seen as hierarchically arranged having God at the pinnacle

of the pyramid followed by angels, male, female, animals, insects, plants and the earth at the bottom of the ladder.<sup>10</sup> The relationship in this hierarchy of being is one of domination and subordination, what is on the top subordinates the one below. Reality is also visualized in dualistic ways: God–humans, humans–world, spirit –matter, male–female, and soul–body giving primacy to the first of these equations. The hierarchical and dualistic world view negates the essential interconnectedness of reality. Hence the traditional theological paradigm promotes a truncated view of the ultimate fulfillment.

The traditional theological paradigm, with its hierarchical and dualistic world view, has adverse consequences for the well-being of human beings and the cosmos. For it justifies the exploitation of other human beings especially the poor and women, as well as of animals, plants, and the natural resources. It also promotes an attitude of irreverence and lack of concern for the Otherkind. The colonization of other peoples and their land, the subjugation of women, the massive extinction of animal and plant species, the air, water and soil pollution, the ozone depletion, the acid rain, the green house effect, etc. can be seen as a consequence of the worldview that extols an anthropocentric and otherworldly salvation.

## VII. *New Paradigm Based on the Common Creation Story*

The awareness of the inadequacies and dangers inherent in the traditional theological paradigm has impressed upon theologians of the need for a paradigm shift in theology. The new insights into the working of the cosmos made available by scientific discoveries have initiated a change in the theological paradigm. Science has discovered that, besides the creation stories specific to each of the religions in the world, there is a creation story common to all.<sup>11</sup> Thomas Berry divides this history into four phases: a) the galactic phase, in which the elemental particles and then the stars were formed; b) the geological phase, in which the earth evolved as a member of the solar system; c) the biological phase, in which life on earth came into existence in all its variety; and d) the human phase, which began with the rise of consciousness and cultural forms. The galactic phase began some 15 — 20 billion years ago with

10 Theodore Hiebert discusses the development of the hierarchical and dualistic worldview and its subsequent influence upon Christian theology with reference to Origen. See Hiebert (2000), 141–143.

11 Brief sketches of this story can be found in Boff (1997), 42–61; Murphy & Ellis (1996), 39–63; McFague (1993), 41–47; Edwards (1995), 139–142; Ruether (1992), 40–47 and, McDaniel (1995), 78–85. I am basing myself on the summary presentations found in McDaniel and Ruether.

a Big Bang, with the explosion of a dense core of energy. Within seconds, the four forces of the universe — gravity, electromagnetism, and the two laws governing the interactions of nuclei within atoms, namely, the strong and weak nuclear forces — emerged. Eventually elemental particles emerged, the first atoms, helium and hydrogen came into existence, and, they became the seeds of the evolution of stars and galaxies. The gravitational force allowed helium and hydrogen to form great clouds which collapsed to form stars. These early stars exploded as supernovas forming, in the process, the rest of the atomic elements, and opened the way for the formation of the second generation stars and galaxies. Our galaxy, the Milky Way, with its billions of stars is one among hundreds of billions of galaxies. The sun, with its planets, is one star in the corner of the Milky Way.

In the geological phase the earth emerged from a cloud of gas surrounding the sun about 4. 45 billion years ago and the process of geological evolution began on it. The cooling of the earth's surface and the volcanic activity within continued, initiating the development of the atmosphere, and the continents. While the geological evolutionary process prematurely ended on other planets, it continued in a dynamic way on earth leading toward the biological phase. The first forms of life emerged in the ocean some 4 billion years ago in the form of single-celled organisms without nuclei. Genetic mutations in these organisms gradually paved the way for the emergence of photosynthesizing bacteria about 3 billion years ago which could convert sun's energy into carbohydrates and release oxygen in the process. Another 2 billion years saw the development of multi-celled bacteria, then the evolution of aquatic plants and animals. About 500 million years ago these plants emerged from the sea to colonize the land. Over the next 200 million years, the algae developed into ferns and trees; and fish into amphibians which became egg-laying reptiles and birds. About 225 millions years ago the reptiles grew into dinosaurs who ruled the planet for 160 million years. The mammals, which also emerged about this time, rose to prominence after the extinction of the giant reptiles some 60 million years ago. The evolution of mammals led to the emergence of proto-humans about 4 million years ago, and the *Homo sapiens* appeared only 400,000 years ago and the human beings as we know now made their appearance 40,000 years ago.

The human phase is divided into five periods: the age of hunters and gatherers (the Paleolithic Phase), the age of agricultural villages (the Neolithic Phase); the age of the classical civilization and religious cultures of the world; the rise of nations and the emergence of science and technology; and finally, the emerging "Ecozonic" age. Each of these phases is characterized by a specific type of relationship between humans and nature. The emerging Ecozonic age will be marked by so much human control over the earth that it could alter the basic chemistry and biology of the planet in ways that form a geo-



logical age of its own. The control can be used to heal or to destroy and humans ought to follow the path of healing the planet.<sup>12</sup>

The common creation story establishes that the entire cosmos is interconnected, that life forms are connected to and dependent on others, and that human beings, as the late comers on this planet, are intimately linked with and dependent on all that went before in the evolutionary process. From this perspective, human beings are not above or beside nature; they are embedded in nature and constitute an integral part of it. All human endeavor takes place within it and nothing happens apart from it. Accordingly, human fulfillment also has an essential relational dimension. It is related to the fulfillment of the creation itself. In other words, there cannot be a human fulfillment without the fulfillment of the created order.

The common creation story has been instrumental for a shift away from the focus on history as the history of human salvation to the view of the total history of the universe as constituting the salvation history. Salvation is not seen as an escape from this world effected through the redemptive work of a transcendent God from outside history. The new paradigm sees God as intimately related to the cosmos and as immanent to the evolutionary process. Since we live, move and have our being in nature, human salvation is integrally linked to the salvation of the world. Human salvation is not from the world but it is with the world. Thus the new theological paradigm links human destiny with the destiny of the cosmos and sees the fate of human beings as coextensive with the fate of the universe. This broader vision opens up alternative ways of conceiving the Christian idea of human fulfillment.

### VIII. *Alternative Visions: Liberation, Feminist and Ecological Theologies*

The inadequacy of the traditional way of approaching human fulfillment consists in the fact that it is anthropocentric, individualistic, spiritual and otherworldly. From this limited point of view human salvation is narrowly understood as the salvation of the soul. Accordingly, the traditional eschatology focused its attention on the eschata — the last things' that happen to individuals after death, namely, heaven, hell, purgatory, and, judgment. It also dealt with those events that affected the whole human race at the end, such as the second coming, general resurrection and the general judgment. Basically, then, the last things were looked upon as objects, predictable events

12 McDaniel takes the division of the human phase into five periods from Thomas Berry. Cfr. McDaniel (1995), 84–85.

and places in the world beyond. This physical style of eschatology<sup>13</sup> fails to articulate the personal, social and cosmic significance of the eschaton who is Christ.

However, there are alternative visions of human fulfillment initiated, especially, by Latin American liberation theologians<sup>14</sup>, feminist theologians<sup>15</sup> and ecotheologians.<sup>16</sup> Without going into the details, a general overview of their main arguments is given below. The liberationist eschatology argues, along the lines of *Gaudium et Spes*,<sup>17</sup> that the hope for human fulfillment in the future Kingdom of God has implications for the present human existence in society in that it should motivate the believers to commit themselves to the promotion of justice, peace and the transformation of society as well as to fulfilling one's duties to society for the common good. In that way the Latin American liberation theology emphasizes that the hope for the future fulfillment has this-worldly, historical and social dimensions, and hence, it cannot be exclusively focused on to the destiny of the individual human persons.

If the liberation theologies critique the traditional understanding of human fulfillment as extremely individualistic, spiritual and otherworldly, the feminist theologians highlight the male focus on the survival and immortality of individual souls in traditional eschatology. They criticize the one-sided focus on the survival of souls leading to the debasement of the body as well as matter. Since the patriarchal thought often identifies women with the body and matter, the masculine bias in eschatology is viewed as detrimental to the well-being and fulfillment of women in particular, and the material world in general. Besides, they argue, that the tendency to give inordinate attention to the individual souls diverts the attention from the collective destiny of humanity as a whole, as well as from the destiny of the earth. Thus, the feminist theologians criticize the traditional notion of human fulfillment for being spiritual, individualistic, and andro-centric.

Yet another line of criticism of the traditional eschatology comes from the ecotheologians. The tendency to conceive human fulfillment as the enjoyment of the beatific vision of God by the disembodied souls, according to the ecotheologians, is essentially anthropocentric and otherworldly. It promotes a negative attitude toward the earth and the cosmos, besides denying intrinsic

13 Quoted in Hayes (1990), 11.

14 For a concise statement of the eschatological vision from the Latin American perspective, see Gutierrez G (1988), 121-140.

15 Ruether's discussion on eschatology provides a feminist view of human fulfillment. See Ruether (1983), 235-258.

16 For an ecotheological vision of human fulfillment, Cfr. McFague (1995), 197-212; Ruether (1992).

17 See *Gaudium et Spes* 39, 43.

value to them. From the perspective of human fulfillment as the beatific vision of God, the earth can have only an instrumental value, as a place where human beings work out their transcendent destiny. Thus, as far as human fulfillment is concerned the earth and the cosmos are insignificant. They form only a stage that can be dismantled once the human drama is enacted. This vision and the attitude it generates are detrimental to the well-being of the cosmos as they lead to the exploitation of the earth and the natural resources. The ecotheologians argue that human fulfillment must be perceived in relation to the fulfillment of the whole universe rather than anthropocentrically. The significance of the essential relational dimension of reality, including human reality, is also underscored by the North American Process theology influenced by the process thought of Alfred North Whitehead.

The challenges posed by the Latin American liberation theology, feminist theology, ecotheology, process theology as well as by the new understanding of the cosmos emerging from the scientific discoveries sufficiently indicate the inadequacies of the traditional view of human fulfillment. The anthropocentric, individualistic, spiritual, and otherworldly understanding of human fulfillment dichotomizes humans and the world, God and world, individual persons and the humankind, body and soul, and, this world and the other-world. This dualistic and hierarchical understanding of reality and the accompanying notion of human fulfillment are radically opposed to the contemporary human experience of reality and the emerging sensibilities. They fail to represent a comprehensive vision of human longing and fulfillment. This calls for a revisioning and re-interpreting the Christian understanding of the ultimate destiny.

### *IX. Creating a Base for an Ecological Vision of Human Fulfillment*

Christianity, as a soteriological religion, envisions the notion of salvation or fulfillment as the semantic axis of the Christian theological reflection as a whole. Over the centuries this fact has been lost sight of and eschatology has forfeited some of its power mainly due to its narrow focus on the anthropocentric, spiritual and transcendent notion of the human destiny. However, in the contemporary times, there is an urgent need to recapture the full soteriological import of Christianity because only a rediscovery of the eschatological promise of the Christian religion can transform it into a source of hope for nature and humankind. For, a comprehensive Christian vision of human fulfillment envisages, not only the destiny of individuals, but also, and more importantly, the destiny of the whole human race together with the entire cosmos.

A holistic and comprehensive vision of human fulfillment requires a re-configuring of the notions of God, Christ, Spirit, church, human beings, and the world. This is because the dimension of salvation and fulfillment permeates the Christian theological understanding of God who creates in order to manifest God's self and God's saving plan for the cosmos, who, in Christ, becomes the eschaton of the created order, including humanity, and who in the Spirit constantly vivifies and renews the creation. The church as the ecological and eschatological community witnesses to the fullness of life that God in Christ through the Spirit brings about in humankind and in the whole of creation. From this point of view, an authentic understanding of human longing and fulfillment from an ecological and eschatological perspective necessarily calls for a reformulation or reconstruction of the entire sphere of Christian theology. Since this would require a much longer treatment, I shall limit myself to specifying the process with reference to Christology, pneumatology and theological anthropology.

#### X. *Ecological Understanding of Christ, the Eschaton*

Jesus Christ as the eschaton is the ultimate destiny of humans and the creation. On the basis of this faith statement it is possible to affirm that the Christian understanding of fulfillment, taken in its broader sense, calls for an ecological christology. Without discovering the ecological dimensions of the Christ-event, it would not be possible to develop an ecological eschatology that underscores the eschatological significance of creation. Historically, it has always been in response to specific situations that the Christian tradition sought to interpret the significance of Jesus Christ. In the contemporary times the ecological crisis provides the context for the articulation of the eschatological significance of the person of Christ.

But the fact that Jesus made reference to natural objects and phenomena in his teachings and parables does not ecologize either his person or his message; neither does it express the eschatological import of Christ for creation. For a radical ecologization of christology, the focus must be on the christological themes such as the incarnation, the ministry, the death, resurrection and the glorification of Jesus. These themes have implicit ecological relevance that can be beneficially retrieved to facilitate the understanding of the broader eschatological perspective of fulfillment both of the humankind and the cosmos. This requires a broadening of the scope of christology.

Evidently, the prophetic, wisdom, sacramental, eschatological, Process and liberation christologies do not explicitly deal with ecological issues. How-

ever, they offer valuable sources for the ecologization of christology,<sup>18</sup> as well as for the understanding of Christ as the eschatological fulfillment of creation. While the prophetic and liberation christologies focus on the ministry of Jesus, the wisdom, Process, sacramental and eschatological christologies concentrate on the recreating, transforming, renewing, fulfilling presence of Christ in creation. In the incarnation, God chooses in Jesus to be with the created world, and by becoming flesh, God enters into bodily existence and participates in the life process of the world. In this way, the incarnation upholds the dignity of the created world in its totality, for the created world manifests the presence of God and it becomes the locus of God's self manifestation.<sup>19</sup> The incarnation transforms the destiny of the created order as creation becomes the embodiment of God, and hence, an integral part of the saving plan of God. Through his ministry Jesus challenged and overturned the notion of power as domination over other peoples and other fellow beings. On the other hand, the parables of Jesus, according to McFague, destabilize the hierarchical order and dualistic mentality which, in the contemporary ecological context, have the power to challenge the hierarchical dualistic approach to the world. Similarly, McFague finds in the healing ministry of Jesus the sources for working for the wholeness of creation. In Jesus' table fellowship she identifies his inclusive attitude. This way of extending the ministry, teaching and table fellowship of Jesus to the ecological sphere can highlight the creation's longing for fulfillment as well as motivate Christians to commit themselves to the well-being of the earth and the realization of the eschatological destiny of the earth community.<sup>20</sup>

Jesus' passion and death are the consequences of the options he made in his ministry — to challenge the hierarchical domination, to bring about

18 McFague offers an overview of the ecological potential of these Christologies. See McFague (2000), 29–30.

19 Following Teilhard de Chardin, Boff asserts the presence of the Christic element in the universe from the beginning and the incarnation as the crystallization of the Christic. He says, "The incarnation is already present at the beginning of the universe. The Son who was always within, accompanying the evolutionary process — *Christus evolutor* — comes into bloom." Boff (1997), 178. McFague also follows a similar line and says, "Christianity is *par excellence* the religion of the incarnation and, in one sense, is about nothing but embodiment." McFague (1993), 163. This embodiment includes all, especially the suffering, oppressed, vulnerable bodies including the earth.

20 In her ecological Christology, McFague tries to recover the ecological potential of the parables, the healing ministry and the table fellowship of Jesus by interpreting them in relation to the universe as the Body of God. She finds in these three dimensions of Jesus' ministry the deconstructive, reconstructive and prospective ways of bringing wholeness to the universe. See McFague (1993), 173. For her complete treatment of the theme see Ch. 6 and McFague (2000), 29–43.

wholeness through healing and to include everyone in his table fellowship. According to McFague, today the domination of humans over the nonhuman world leads to the passion and death of the Otherkind and of the earth. Those who opt for the inclusion and wholeness of the earth community will have to suffer the same consequences. The cross of Christ also reveals the cruciform life that we are called to live — to sacrifice our selfishness and greed for profit and gain — so that the wellbeing of the earth community may be ensured. The resurrection and glorification of Christ provide the hope for the renewal of the whole cosmos by the life giving power of God. This hope becomes our source of commitment to the earth community.<sup>21</sup> Through resurrection, Jesus becomes the Cosmic Christ who, as the Wisdom of God, is present to and vivifies the whole creation leading it to its eschatological fulfillment in the future.<sup>22</sup> Thus the eschaton appeared in Christ is the eschaton not only of human beings but also of the entire creation. That is to say, Christ as the eschaton leads the entire created order, including humankind, to its final and definitive fulfillment.

### XI. *Ecological Understanding of the Spirit*

The ecological christology that underscores the eschatological destiny of creation looks forward to an ecologized understanding of the Spirit. For, an ecological understanding of the Christian notion of the Spirit provides the motivation for actualizing the eschatological hope offered in the Christ-event for the renewal and recreation of the exploited and degraded nature. In this context it is important to point out that the traditional, metaphysical conception of the Spirit has little relevance for addressing our ecological concerns. According to Wallace, the contemporary theology has inherited “a metaphysically burdened idea of the Spirit that has little purchase on the role of the Spirit in creation as the power of unity between all natural kinds.”<sup>23</sup> The eco-

21 According to McFague the cross and resurrection are central to the embodiment theology. It is Jesus' embodiment ministry that brought about his passion and death. McFague (1993), 173–74.

22 In Boff's scheme the movement is from Cosmogogenesis to Christogenesis—to Christ of Faith to the historical Jesus. Through the passion and resurrection Jesus becomes the Cosmic Christ. He says, “Through the resurrection Christ leaves behind the limits of space-time imposed by incarnation. His limits are now the same as the dimensions of the cosmos; he is truly the cosmic and universal Christ.” Boff (1997), 181. He elaborates his cosmic Christology in Chapter 9. The notion of Cosmic Christ and the fulfillment of creation in Christ is also dealt with by Edwards (1995), 81–83 and McFague (1993), 179–191.

23 Wallace (2000), 52. Leonardo Boff also argues for a move away from the metaphysical notions to an understanding of the Spirit-as-cosmic-force and vital energy. See Boff (1997), 161.

logical situation calls for a move away from an understanding of the Spirit in the metaphysical categories of being and substance to an embodied understanding. That is to say, "God as Spirit should be figured as both *wholly other* to creation and as *wholly enfleshed* within creation as the green love who nurtures and sustains all living things."<sup>24</sup> In this way, an ecologized pneumatology unifies both the transcendence and the immanence of God's Spirit.

This way of conceiving the Spirit transforms the world into the locus of divine presence and manifestation. In his discussion on Trinity from an ecological perspective, Denis Edwards emphasizes the need for looking at "the trinitarian God as the God of dynamic, ecstatic and fecund self communication of God", and says, "creation is the free outflow of this divine fecundity, the self-expression of the trinitarian God, so that each creature is a mode and a sign of divine presence."<sup>25</sup> Once the world itself is seen as permeated by God in the Spirit, the earth ceases to be dead matter. Wallace powerfully states what it entails to ecologize the understanding of the Spirit:

An earth-based understanding of the Spirit will not domesticate the Spirit by locating her activity simply alongside nature; rather, nature itself in all its variety will be construed as the primary mode of being for the Spirit's work in the world. Now the earth's waters and winds and the birds and fires will not be regarded only as *symbols* of the Spirit but rather as sharing in her very *being* as the Spirit is enfleshed and embodied through natural organisms and processes.<sup>26</sup>

This point of view does not visualize a radical separation between Spirit and nature; in stead, the Spirit is seen as pervading nature. The Christian profession of faith in the Spirit as "the Lord, Giver of life" (*Dominus Vivificans*) emphasizes this all pervading and life giving embodiment of the Spirit in creation. The principle of *perichoresis*, on the other hand, brings out the trinitarian nature of creation, for, the other two Divine Persons are also present in the Spirit who is immanent in creation.<sup>27</sup> The trinitarian character of creation allows us to extend the traditional understanding of the Spirit as the bond of love between the Father and the Son (*vinculum caritatis*) "to include the Spirit's *biocentric* role as the power of healing and renewal within all creation."<sup>28</sup> Thus, the transition from a metaphysical and theocentric understanding to a biocentric and ecologized understanding of the Spirit as the life giving presence and manifestation of God in creation stimulates faith to see

24 Wallace (2000), 54.

25 Edwards (1995), 116.

26 Wallace (2000), 55.

27 Boff (1997), 166-167.

28 Wallace (2000), 53.

that creation is integral to the salvific plan of God and that the immanent God is constantly leading the created order to its eschatological fulfillment. This vision acts as a power that transforms our attitude toward the natural world and provides the hope for the renewal of creation. From this perspective, the Spirit's offer of new life becomes a gift that the humankind shares with the whole of creation. The new life in the Spirit ceases to be the monopoly of humans as it is the promise of fulfillment for the entire cosmos. This promise is not exclusively for the future because the created order is already being renewed and recreated by the gracious and life-giving presence of the Spirit who is actively involved in guiding it to its eschatological fulfillment.

## XII. *Ecological Understanding of Human Beings*

The ecological understanding of God, Christ and Spirit in the light of the common creation story has implications for the way we understand human beings and their fulfillment. The common creation story convincingly shows that the human species, just as any other species, is a part of the same evolutionary process, and, therefore, human beings are intimately related to all other creatures. As John Polkinghorne says, "We are all made of the ashes of dead stars,"<sup>29</sup> and, therefore, the planet earth is a home which we share with all other forms of life.<sup>30</sup> This view of human beings, along with the ecological christology and pneumatology, effects a transformed understanding of the various themes of the theological anthropology such as grace, freedom, sin, human activity and vocation, and final destiny.

The Christian theological anthropology, that only recently became a theological discipline of its own right, tended to understand human beings in relation to God and, in the process, neglected our relation to the world.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, the emphasis has been on being created in the image of God for a transcendent destiny beyond the earth. All the other dimensions of Christian existence — sin, grace, freedom, work, etc. — were looked at from this narrow anthropocentric and otherworldly perspective. This view, by distorting the

29 Polkinghorne (1986), 56.

30 Boff visualizes the universe emerging from a Primordial Womb' which is also our primordial womb. He considers the Milky Way, our galaxy as our 'Cosmic Homeland'; the solar system as our 'Cosmic City' and the 'Great Mother Earth' as our 'House'. See Boff (1997), 46-50. Sallie McFague argues that for an ecological theology we need to realize that the earth is our home. Cfr. McFague (1993), 102.

31 McFague bemoans our failure to see ourselves "as mundane, as beings of this world, of the earth, earthy". McFague (1993), 103.



understanding of human beings in the world, has contributed to the neglect of the earth and the question of the eschatological fulfillment of the cosmos.

An authentic ecological understanding of human fulfillment calls for "a decentering and recentering of human beings" in the world.<sup>32</sup> It would require abandoning the anthropocentric perspective of the Priestly account of human beings called to subjugate and dominate the Otherkind (Gen. 1), and accepting the essential human kinship with the earth as depicted in the Yahwist creation account (Gen. 2) and demonstrated by the common creation story. Thus, the decentering will help us move away from an anthropocentric, hierarchical and dualistic view of human beings and their fulfillment, and, the recentering will contribute to the recognition of our essential interrelationship and interdependence as well as our shared destiny.<sup>33</sup>

The location of human beings within the earth community allows the understanding of grace as God's self communication in nature, and, Jesus Christ as the paradigmatic instance of this divine presence in creation.<sup>34</sup> The human response to this creative presence of the divine is to be actualized in the context of the earth "as partners in creation, as the self-conscious, reflexive part of the creation that could participate in furthering the process."<sup>35</sup> Sin, from this perspective, will have everything to do with our relationship with the earth. In traditional understanding, sin is seen as offense against God as well as offense against human beings, but the ecological dimension of sin, namely, human offense against the earth, has been ignored. Describing ecological sin, Hoyt says, "ecologically, sin is expressed as the arrogant denial of the creaturely limitations on human ingenuity and technology, a defiant disrespect for the interdependent relationships of all creatures and their environments established in the covenant of creation, and an anthropocentric abuse of what God has made and values."<sup>36</sup> Thus, an ecological understanding of sin envisages offenses against other human beings, other animals and the natural world as sin against God.<sup>37</sup> If sin involves ecology, then human salvation also needs to be understood from within the ecological context as embracing the transformation of the whole universe.<sup>38</sup> That is to say, the hoped

32 McFague (1993), 108.

33 Undeniably, the two creation accounts in the Book of Genesis contain profound truths and great potentials for an ecologization of anthropology. However, these have not been adequately explored.

34 Boff (1997), 177-78.

35 McFague (1993), 105.

36 Hoyt (1996), 171.

37 According to McFague sin is living a lie in relation to other human beings, other animals and the natural world, and this, in turn, is sin against God. McFague (1993), 116-129.

38 Edwards (1995), 145, 149.

for final and definitive fulfillment is not exclusively for human beings; rather it is our fulfillment insofar as it is also the fulfillment of the whole cosmos. There is no human salvation apart from the salvation of the world.

### XIII. *Ecological Eschatology and the Vision of Human Longing and Fulfillment*

The traditional theology envisions an eternity of life of human beings with God as fulfillment. That is to say, from an extremely individualistic perspective, human fulfillment concerns the salvation of individual persons; and from a slightly broader perspective it includes the whole of humankind. From the perspective of the modern genome project, human fulfillment may be conceived as an indefinite prolongation of human life achievable through genetic manipulation. But in all these instances, the fulfillment of creation falls outside the sphere of the discourse about human fulfillment and salvation. In fact, in spite of its affirmation of the goodness of creation, a major part of the Christian tradition does not accord any ultimate significance to the created world. By and large, we inherit and live by that tradition. It is possible that, just as in traditional eschatological discourse, the very idea of human longing and fulfillment could be an anthropocentric concern. Perhaps this would explain the general Christian callousness toward the planet earth and the lack of sensitivity to the ecological crisis.

However, human longing and fulfillment can also be viewed from an ecological perspective. In fact, the main argument of this paper has been that, in the context of the present ecological crisis and the consequent threat of a total annihilation of life itself, any responsible Christian discourse on human fulfillment should take into account the longing and fulfillment of the entire creation. We have briefly discussed the scriptural as well as the scientific basis for the argument and also critically highlighted the ecological consequences of the traditional anthropocentric, individualistic and otherworldly view of human fulfillment. In the light of the critique offered by liberationist, feminist and ecological eschatologies, we have not only underscored the need for re-visioning the whole sphere of the eschatological discourse, but also pointed out the basis for the ecologization of eschatology with reference to christology, pneumatology and theological anthropology.

At this point we realize that the decisive question that emerges from this study of human fulfillment from an ecological context is not how we, humans, can actualize our infinite longings. Rather it is how to adjust human longing and fulfillment to the requirements of the well-being and fulfillment of the creation. This question raises the ethical challenges involved in the ecological eschatology. If the traditional notion of human fulfillment focused narrowly

on the moral issues at the intra-personal and the inter-personal levels, an ecological perspective of human fulfillment necessarily requires the inclusion of eco-justice issues such as the interrelationship between production, consumption, and life style, on the one hand, and, the exploitation of natural resources, poisoning of water, air and soil, deforestation, ozone depletion, greenhouse effect, acid rains etc. on the other. The ethical issues also include the link between ecology and social justice. A discussion on the eco-justice issues is beyond the scope of the present essay.

However, from the perspective of an ecological eschatology, an eternity for human beings or a mere indefinite prolongation of human existence can hardly be conceived as fulfillment. According to an ecological eschatology, human fulfillment does not primarily refer to the quantity of life; rather its primary reference is to the quality of life, not only of humankind but also of the Otherkind. Since life is seen as a web of relationship among the members of the biotic community, the quality of the present human life is determined by the quality of the interrelationship that exists among humans, creation and God. The movement toward the goal of a perfect realization of the interrelatedness may be conceived as human fulfillment. Since every authentic relationship is a growing process, human fulfillment itself must be considered as a process in which God, humankind and the Otherkind are intimately involved.

The *Bhagavadgita*, one of the popular Indian scriptures, describes a fulfilled person as *sarvabhutahiteratah* — that is, one who takes delight in the well being of all creatures.<sup>39</sup> The one who is concerned solely about oneself is considered as a sinner who harms the body of creation. In other words, one longs for and seeks after one's own fulfillment by desiring and seeking the well being of all. Along similar lines, an ecological eschatology envisions human fulfillment as commitment to and realization of the well being of all creation in God. The quality of life that emerges from such a process is human fulfillment from the perspective the ecological eschatology.

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39 *The Bhagavadgita* 5: 25; 12: 4

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