

The Story of the Universe: A Challenge to Missiologists

Cyril Hally

Eric in retirement may witness, and hopefully participate in, a profoundly significant development in the multidisciplinary study of mission.

Genuine dialogue has yet to commence between the leading theoretical ecological researchers and missiologists. In his 1991 magisterial contribution to *The American Society of Missiology Series Number 16*,¹ David Bosch does not list ecology among the thirteen elements of the emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm which he identified.

His aim was to 'demonstrate the extent to which the understanding and practice of mission have changed during almost twenty centuries of Christian missionary history. ... we find ourselves in the midst of one of the most important shifts in the understanding and practice of the Christian mission'.²

But in his last work before his premature death³ Bosch discusses five ingredients of such a missiology which he believed to be of crucial importance. Amongst others which 'involve less complex issues'⁴ he lists the ecological dimension.

He observes that the organisers of the 1991 Annual Congress of the Southern African Missiological Society, devoted to the theme of Mission and Ecology, 'received more offers for papers than for any of the Society's twenty-two previous congresses - a clear indication that missionaries and missiologists have begun to wake up to this important dimension of their ministry'.⁵ Many missionaries have indeed become aware of the ecological challenge to mission. I will treat later of one such. However, judging by the lack of ecological articles and book reviews in the major missiology journals there is

1 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, New York, 1991.

2 *Ibid.*, p. xv.

3 David J. Bosch, *Believing in the Future: Towards a Missiology of Western Culture*, 1995.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 55.

5 *Loc. cit.*

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not much evidence that missiologists have become involved.¹ Orbis Books have recently begun publishing ecological titles.²

I would go further than Bosch when he states we are in 'one' of the most important shifts in the understanding and practice of mission. For the first time in human history all cultures are simultaneously in a state of crisis, of unprecedented danger and opportunity. Given the contemporary awareness of inculturation - the on-going process of reciprocal and critical interaction and assimilation between the religious faith of a community and its culture³ - it follows that mission also everywhere is in a state of profound crisis.

Cousins⁴ makes the fundamental claim that we are at a turning point in history and a transformation in consciousness such as humanity has experienced only once before.

In the first *Axial Age*, between 800 and 200 BCE, the world's great metaphysical philosophies emerged from more primal forms of religious consciousness. Cousins claims a second *Axial Age* is about to emerge from the unavoidable encounter of the no longer isolated traditions of the original *Axial Age* and, through the recovery of primal religious encounters, the overcoming of the dualistic consciousness which characterised the axial traditions. This emerging consciousness is global in a double sense, horizontal interaction of cultures and religions, and vertical flowing from the recovery of roots deep in the earth. Admittedly it is risky to make definitive judgements about a contemporary event of presumed historical proportions. Cousins relies on Teilhard's cosmic mysticism and Jung's depth spirituality, both at global dimensions. Surely it is providential that this development coincides with an empirically established 'Story of the Universe' of which humans are the self-conscious expression.⁵

¹ A search of the major missiological reviews revealed a 1988 issue of *Exchange* and a dribble from 1990 on.

² The US Maryknoll Missionary Society publishes Orbis Books to foster international dialogue that is essential to mission.

³ M. Azevedo, *Inculturation and the Challenges of Modernity*, Working Papers on Living Faith and Cultures, 1, Rome, 1982, p. 11.

⁴ As early as 1949, Karl Jaspers pointed out the significance of the Axial Age. Michael Bullock's translation *The Origin and Goal of History*, Yale, 1953. Ewert Cousins, *Christ in the 21st Century*, Rockport, 1933.

⁵ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, San Francisco, 1988; Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story*, San Francisco, 1992.

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In a talk entitled 'Christian Missions in the Late 20th Century', delivered to the US Mission Council in November 1989 in Chicago, Thomas Berry claimed:

presently our first obligation as shamans, as Christians, as missionaries, or simply as members of the earth community is to stop the destruction of the earth in its natural grandeur and its life-giving qualities. This, I propose is our most urgent religious obligation, our first Christian obligation. If this is not done, then everything else becomes irrelevant. Among the primary purposes of contemporary mission activity might well be to assist the various peoples of the world to maintain their inherent intimacy with the natural world, and to assist them in their resistance to external plundering forces.

That Christians have so far not been distinguished for their intimacy with the earth; that we have permitted such destruction can be considered perhaps our greatest failure over these many centuries of Christian history.

The medieval historian, Lynn White, in a much discussed article¹ blamed Christianity and specifically the biblical tradition for the West's alienation from nature especially over the last four centuries (which coincided with the modern mission era). The ecological movement is predominantly secular and somewhat anti-Christian.

Thomas Berry certainly laid down a challenge to missionaries and missiologists. In the change of consciousness which is sweeping over the world today a major contribution is coming from the ecological movement. As this is very recent it is understandable that time had to elapse before the dialogue between ecologists and missiologists could get underway.

As early as 1864 George Marsh in *Man and Nature* raised the issue of conservation.² However, the ecological movement only began in 1962 with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*.³ Beginning in the 1940s numerous articles in scientific journals documented the increasing pollution of water, sea and air. They provided the evidence for Rachel Carson's 'explosive' best-seller. The nuclear threat added to the change in consciousness

¹ Lynn White, 'The Historical Roots of Ecological Crisis' in *Science* No. 155, 1967, p. 1203.

² Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 4, New York, 1987, p. 581.

³ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, Greenwich, Conn., 1962.

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regarding the appropriate relationship between humans and nature. Hence, increasingly at the popular level, technology and the science behind it are subjected to criticism, a major aspect of the crisis of cultures.

At a deeper level the Enlightenment conflict between science and religion has modified due to the extraordinary scientific discoveries early in this century, especially of quantum physics and relativity. In 1929 Hubble's Law enabled scientists to date the origin of the universe approximately fifteen billion years ago. More recent discoveries by molecular biologists concerning the role of DNA in all living phenomena have expanded our understanding of the nature of life.

Theologians, of course, had reflected on the new scientific data. The eminent German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, delivered the 1984-1985 Gifford Lectures, a deep evaluation of the Christian myth of origin. The SCM published the talks under the title *God in Creation : an Ecological Doctrine of Creation*. Ian Barbour, in the 1989-1991 Gifford Lectures, provided a masterly synthesis of the dialogue under way between scientists, philosophers and theologians.¹

In Volume One, entitled *Religion in an Age of Science*,² Barbour identified five features of our scientific age as agenda for his book:

1. The success of the Methods of Science.
2. A New View of Nature.
3. A New Context for Theology.
4. Religious Pluralism in a Global Age.
5. The Ambiguous Power of Technology.

Barbour's perspective is that of process theology. The second, third and fourth of his topics have direct reference to concerns of missiologists.

Closer to missiologists has been the reflection of the World Council of Churches on the ecological crisis. In the mid-1970s the WCC launched a major program entitled 'Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society'. However, due to the urgency of development and economic justice, discussion on sustainability was side tracked.³ Probably this also diverted the attention of missiologists. However, by the late 1980s sustainability had become the watchword for new

¹ A recent Australian book by Kevin O'Shea, *Person in Cosmos*, 1995, also deals with physics, philosophy and theology.

² Ian Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science*, San Francisco, 1990.

³ W. Granberg-Michaelson, *Redeeming the Creation*, 1992, p. 59.

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thinking about patterns of global development. The WCC, at its Assembly in Vancouver in 1983, launched a new program on Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC). This led to the WCC World Convocation on JPIC which took place in Seoul in 1990. One of the most influential persons in these WCC developments has been Charles Birch, former Challis Professor of Biology at this university and a process theologian.

At the Vatican level the Pontifical Academy for the Sciences had held annual study weeks concerned with the implications of ecological devastation. In 1988, the Vatican published a book on the subject, *Physics, Philosophy and Theology: a Common Quest for Understanding*.¹ In the same year the environment entered into Catholic Social Teaching in John Paul's encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, No.34. He followed this in 1990 with *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all Creation* to celebrate the World Day of Peace. This was the first document from the papal magisterium devoted exclusively to environmental issues.² In the most recent social encyclical the topic is treated only in passing³ and not at all in the missionary encyclical of the same year, *Redemptoris Missio*.

Probably the majority of Protestant missionaries today do not look to the WCC for guidance and inspiration. The Vatican, also, is not providing leadership in matters ecological. Nevertheless, significant developments have taken place among Catholics.

One such is the increasing influence of Thomas Berry. As a seminarian, with a knowledge of classical Chinese and Sanskrit he read widely in the Chinese, Hindu and Buddhist classics. After ordination and doctoral studies in history he went to China as a missionary. With the accession to power of Mao he had to leave China. He taught Asian Studies in university departments.

The publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and his earlier study of Teilhard de Chardin, led him to focus on the deterioration of the environment. In 1966 he began to conduct a doctoral program in History of Religions at Fordham University from an increasing ecological perspective. In 1979 he established his own centre for Religious Research in Riverdale, New York. As a cultural historian he says that he worked back, beyond the classical cultures, to an earlier shamanic period of human community, and further back to the earth community, including its geological and biological as well as its human components. He describes himself as

¹ R. Russell, W. Stroeger and S. Coyne, *Physics, Philosophy and Theology: a Common Quest for Understanding*, 1988.

² Seán McDonagh, *Passion for the Earth*, London, 1994, p. 106.

³ *Centesimus Annus*, 1991, No. 37.

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a 'geologist'.¹ Berry's years of reflection have centred upon the need for a new cosmology, a new creation myth. This he finds in the story of the origin and development of the universe provided by contemporary science. His 1988 book, *Dream of the Earth*, marks perhaps the end of the Christian exploration of the significance of the scientific discoveries and the beginning of a new mission. With the help of a disciple, the mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme, he tells the story again in *The Story of the Universe*.²

The implication of this story is of immense importance for missiologists. Integral to every culture and religion is its myth of origin. This new story could provide depth to all such myths, including the biblical, while respecting their diversity. The nature of reality as manifested by the new story is of a creative tension between differentiation and communion. Nature never repeats herself yet everything is related and supportive of everything else. This is precious insight.

Thomas Berry has many disciples amongst missionaries. One such is Seán McDonagh, a student of mine also. An Irish Columban, after ordination in 1969 he was appointed to Mindanao. After three years' study of the local language, Cebuano, and the culture, he transferred to Washington where he studied anthropology and linguistics at Catholic and Georgetown Universities from 1972 to 1975. During this time he came into contact with Thomas Berry and has interacted with him ever since. On his return to the Philippines he taught anthropology and linguistics in the Mindanao State University situated in Marawi City, the heart of Muslim Mindanao. He became involved in local environmental issues, especially related to deforestation and the destruction of Lake Lanao.

In 1980 he was called to the Santa Cruz mission in South Cotabato in central Mindanao. This mission was devoted to working among the T'boli tribal peoples displaced as a result of deforestating, mining and hydro-electric 'developments'. Over the next ten years he was involved in an intensive hands-on experience of a wide variety of environmental initiatives. These ranged from

¹ Paul Collins, *God's Earth*, Melbourne, 1995, p. 150. Collins conducted several interviews with Berry in 1990 and 1993. See also Anne Lonergan and Caroline Richards, eds., *Thomas Berry and the New Cosmology*, Mystic, 1987 and Thomas Clarke, *Befriending the Earth: a Theology of Reconciliation Between Humans and the Earth*, Mystic, 1991.

² Swimme has just published a new book *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos: Humanity and the New Story*, New York, 1996.

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reafforestation to primary health care to support for cultural revitalisation.

Reflection on his experience led to an examination of the ecological situation in Ireland and to two books, the first written while lecturing in ecology at the Pacific Mission Institute in Sydney. *To Care for the Earth*, eventually published by Geoffrey Chapman in 1986 after being rejected by a dozen publishers in Britain, Ireland and North America for whom 'ecology and theology were like oil and water', as he recalled reviewing a book for *The Tablet* in August this year. The book sold well due to the credibility of its missionary author. A second followed in 1990.¹

In 1988 at Pusan, Korea, the Columbans, including Seán McDonagh, met in General Assembly to articulate their contemporary mission and plans for the future. In the Acts of the Assembly under the heading of 'Solidarity with the Poor in Ecological Perspective' one reads:

Our attempts to live in solidarity with the poor have led us in some places to a further related insight (since the 1982 Assembly). The context then was that of people trying to ensure subsistence-level, sustainable livelihoods for themselves and their families. It very rapidly became clear that the very system which is denying them a livelihood is also undermining the possibility of any alternative. People are made 'radically' poor, without the possibility of a creative alternative.

After a description of how their world is being destroyed, the text resumes:

As a service to creative solidarity with the poor of the world we attempt to initiate reflection in faith on the implications of this ecological insight. The poor require of those in solidarity with them a dedication to saving the source of their livelihood, the earth.²

McDonagh also was influential in the decision of the Bishops of the Philippines in 1988 to promulgate the first Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Ecology, *What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?* The year 1988 seems to have been that when, in the mission context, the ecological dimension came of age.

¹ *The Greening of the Church*, New York, 1990.

² *Becoming More Missionary*, Acts of the Columban General Assembly, 1988, Nos. 67 and 68.

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For the last four years McDonagh has been Central Co-ordinator for Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation for the Missionary Society of St. Columban. He has continued to explore the Christian heritage in an attempt to discover how that tradition can help Christians to respond to the contemporary challenges in these three areas always in the context of mission. He has written extensively in newspapers and journals in many countries. He co-operates with the WCC and several NGOs. He was co-ordinator of the three year (1993-1996) Columban Campaign on Debt and Development Alternatives with an office in Washington. This was a lobby and information program aimed at comprehensive debt reduction (including World Bank and IMF debt). As part of his contribution McDonagh published a further book.¹ At present he is chair of the Board of Greenpeace, Ireland. Finally, he is an ecological consultant along with Leonardo Boff to Orbis Books.²

The multifaceted activity of McDonagh is an example of the role missionaries can play today as exchange agents between local churches by participating in multiple networks. His work is an example of how ecology is becoming an integral part of the contemporary mission project. The internalising of the story of the universe provides him and others with dynamism and focus in the midst of diversity of mission outreach.

The fact that Eric was the inaugural Professor of Religious Studies in Sydney University, is indicative of how recent is the contribution of Religious Studies scholarship to Australia at secular academic institutions. Only since 1973, has Studies of Religion been an examinable HSC subject.

This addition to Australian academia has coincided with the Aboriginal re-vitalisation movement. As inheritors of the oldest cosmology, their 'pre-Axial consciousness (where it survives) uniquely qualifies them to discern a harmonious relation between the human community and the earth'.³

It has also coincided with the evolution from migration to polyethnic (multi-culturalism) studies. In Australia, there are now living communities of all the world's major, and many of the minor, religions. Religious Studies scholarship has contributed much to the enriching inter-action between the original inhabitants, the mainstream population and the post World War II arrivals.

¹ *Passion for the Earth*, London, 1994.

² Of the last 85 books published by Orbis, 20 have dealt with Ecology and Religion but few of the authors are missiologists.

³ Cousins, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

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The discipline has also coincided with a new religious demographic phenomenon, namely, the rapid increase of the formally non-religious segment of the population.¹

All these religious categories of people are confronted with our new capacity to understand the significance of the story of the universe 'in its full dimension in space and its sequence of transformations in time... the universe is the only text without a context. Every particular mode of being is universe-referent and its meaning is established only within this comprehensive setting. This is the reason why this story of the universe, and especially of the planet Earth, is so all-important. Through our understanding of this story, our own role in the story is revealed. In this revelation lies our way into the future.² It will need to be integrated into Religious Studies. If so, it will provide new psychic energy.

¹ David Barrett in his *World Christian Encyclopedia* claimed in 1892 that non-religious were as numerous as Catholics, 800 million adherents each.

² T. Berry, 'Into the Future' in R. Gottlier, ed., *This Sacred Earth*, New York, 1996.