

Exploring Earthiness

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The earth is our big book; in which we read as fulfilled what we read as promised in the book of God (Augustine).

When Augustine wrote this in the fourth century, he was pointing out that while the texts of Scripture are a trustworthy witness to the truth for those who (like himself) could read them, God's 'big book', Earth itself, is open for everyone to read. Indeed, God's relationship with all earthly creatures is proclaimed in the opening sentence of Scripture:

*In the beginning God created heaven and earth . . . And God saw **all** that was made . . .and it was very good (Genesis 1:1, 31).*

The world around us, with its species diversity, beauty, complexity and fruitfulness, provides us with a true account of the relationships between ourselves and God and between God and all earthly beings. Or more precisely in today's terms, the ultimate sacred community is earth within the universe itself. It offers each of us as much of the truth about our relationship with God as we are able to grasp. That truth is open to all within it—not just to those men who, like Augustine, could read the story of God's dealings with particular individuals and groups in the Bible. Or those today who can decipher the scientific codes underpinning earth's evolution. In much the same way, Augustine's handwritten Latin version was readable only by a small minority wealthy enough to own a text and educated enough to read it. So he made the important point that knowledge of God is *primarily* revealed in the natural world and so is accessible to everyone: literate and non-literate,

scientist and indigenous people, women and men, human and other-than-human alike: each according to its kind. For all are gifted with life by a God who sees them all as ‘very good’.

Among Christians today, however, the written biblical text and commentaries on it have gained such religious and cultural ascendancy that we often ignore or may even dismiss the revelatory content of the natural world. This narrowing down of our religious perspective has not only blinded us to the revelatory character of Earth. Over time, it has closed our minds to everything in the Bible other than what is interpreted as the ‘history of salvation’: or more precisely, of human salvation. And among humans, the salvation only of a chosen few.

This has blinded us to the all-encompassing history of God’s relationship with Earth and with all its creatures, a blindness for which Job was rebuked by God:

But ask the beasts, and they will teach you;
The birds of the air, and they will tell you;
Or the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;
And the fish of the sea will declare to you.
Who among all these does not know that
The hand of the Lord has done this?
In God’s hand is the life of every living thing
And the breath of all humankind. (Job 12:7-10).

Jesus asserts the same earthly presence of God in the Gospel of Thomas:

If they tell you,

‘Look’! This presence (God’s kingdom) is in the
skies!’

Remember,

The birds who fly the skies have known this all
along.

If they say,

‘It is in the seas’!

Remember,

Dolphins and fish have always known it.

It is not apart from you.

It wells up within each and surrounds all (Gospel of
Thomas 3).

Confidence in the same all-embracing vision of God’s
presence is evident in an account of Patrick’s conversion of
the daughters of the High King of Tara. When they
questioned him about who the ‘new’ God is and where this
God dwelt, Patrick replied:

Our God is the God of all human beings, the God
of Heaven and Earth, of sea and river, of sun and
moon and stars, of the lofty mountain and the lowly
valley; the God above Heaven, the God in heaven,
the God under heaven; this God dwells in heaven
and Earth and sea and all that is in them: inspires
all, quickens all, dominates all, sustains all. Our
God lights the light of the sun; puts springs in the
dry land and has set stars to minister to the greater
lights. . . (Massingham H. J. *The Tree of Life*.)

Chapman and Hall, London 1943. p19: redacted for sexist language!).

The gradual loss in Christian Europe of this immediate sense of a universal divine presence was accelerated by the transition from an oral to a literate culture. The individual's gaze became focused on written words rather than the natural world. That narrow focus shrank our vision of God: from one accessible to every creature according to its kind, to one confined within written texts whose words and meanings were accessible only to a small number of learned men. Over time, this narrowed that vision down, indeed distorted it into a doctrine about human salvation: one that sets us 'apart from' rather than 'within' the community of all earthly creatures. And indeed, not all of us. Discrimination rather than inclusion became a basis for church doctrine and practice.

In *Cultivating Unity* I looked at the gulf between this vision and that of Jesus: at how Jesus's own understanding of the presence of God within each and surrounding all inspired his immediate followers to *cultivate* their oneness with all living creatures: among themselves as well as with non-Jews and Roman citizens and every living creature. For the apostles came to realize that, by virtue of the One God creating all, that oneness *already exists* within the whole of creation.

How has the loss of this vision of the One God affected our idea of Earth? And so affected our relationship with Earth? Thomas Berry answered these questions succinctly:

If a resplendent world gives us an exalted idea of God, a degraded world gives us a degraded idea of God. (Thomas Berry).

Berry did not use the word ‘degraded’ lightly. It sums up the visible ill-effects on Earth and its many-more-than-human inhabitants of what he calls our ‘alienation from the presence of the divine in the world around us’. This is evident in the changes we have made in the chemistry, biological systems, weather patterns and geological structure of the planet. Like Patrick, Berry expanded rather than contracted our view of God by linking it directly to our contemporary scientific understanding of the universe. That numinous, universal divine presence has, he says, always been recognized by the various peoples of the world in their own way. In his Epistle to the Romans, Paul stated that from the beginning of the world ‘we came to know the invisible nature of God through the things that have been made’. Now, thanks to science, there are many more pages for us to read in Earth’s ‘big book’, those pages being written by scientists like Rachel Carson on the sea, James Lovelock on the Earth as Gaia and Lynn Margulis on our symbiosis, our living together with all other living creatures. They expand our vision beyond Earth’s history and our own to include the history of the emergent universe as part of the story of the God gifting it into life; and so expand our vision of God. As human accounts, however, in each case they can only offer glorious glimpses of the whole.

But how do we routinely interpret these additional texts in Earth’s big book? Through Christian religiously utilitarian lenses: that is, we continue to read Earth as a

place flawed by human sin; one whose deposit of earthly treasures is devalued by contrasting them with ‘everlasting treasures in heaven’. At the same time, politically and economically, Earth’s book is read as an encyclopaedic resource base of precious materials, minerals and other-than-human bodies to be translated into monetary wealth. In either case, it is read through the lens of a degraded idea of God: one that was forcefully rejected by Jesus in the parable of the rich fool.

The land of a rich man brought forth plentifully and he thought to himself: ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘I will do this; I will pull down my barns and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry’. But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you and the things you have prepared, whose will they be? (Luke 12: 16b-20).

This parable has been read in a number of ways. But today it must be heard as a parable about our relationship with Earth: one intended to shock us into an awareness of what we as a species are doing to the resource base of all other species. The barns of the parable exemplify the folly of human short-term monetary policies that take no account of their degradation of the earthly environment in the hope and expectation of a future monetary return. As far as I know, this is the only instance in the canonical scriptures

where God (in person, so to speak), is said to address someone as ‘Fool’!

This brings me to the third religious aspect of this kind of relationship with God and with Earth: a degraded idea of ourselves. It assumes that we are here, so to speak, on trial; to live among earthly things but ‘detached’ from them as a source of temptation or contamination. Which itself reflects back a degraded idea of Earth. Some years ago I found a card in the Ashmolean Museum depicting an earthen handwarmer made in the seventeenth century. Engraved on it was a single sentence: *Earth I am, it is most trew; disdain me not, for so are you.* I bought it originally because of the calligraphy. But suddenly last year, it spoke! It shouted at me! It spoke of a degraded, disdainful view of Earth which, the potter saw, expressed a degraded, disdainful view of ourselves; or rather, of our earthly bodies.

Where did that disdain come from? How had he seen it expressed and who had expressed it? Trying to answer these questions led ultimately to my latest book: *Exploring Earthiness*. What does it mean? What did it mean then? What does it mean now? I trace these ideas through the writings of one of the potter’s contemporaries, the Christian philosopher John Locke. He was one of the most influential figures in seventeenth century British and American colonial history. In fact, his work is quoted in the Founder’s Constitution of the United States, and today, his work on *Human Understanding* is a fixture on university philosophical curricula. He concentrated attention on the distinguishing

characteristics of soul and of reason given to ‘Men’—and I mean men only, and so did he—by God. These characteristics, he said, entitle them to treat Earth and all its more-than-human creatures (my term, not his) as ‘Man’s’ property, that concept he used to describe as then existing only to be used for man’s profit; especially monetary profit. The distinctive characteristics of soul and of reason he attributed to some of us *appeared*, and continue to appear to give them the right to use Earth’s resources in ways that degrade and ultimately destroy the lives of its most vulnerable inhabitants, human and more-than-human alike.

And of course, when you think about that—and in the book I trace how these concepts about property actually affected the world globally from then on—you have to ask yourself, what is rational about such behaviour now that we can see its end result. And yet this quality of reason and the attribution of a soul to the human person only is supposed to be the motivation or the qualification for our behaving like that. So there’s a nice paradox.

Such thinking has allowed us to assume that Earth exists for us to use for our own ends or, more precisely, for those ends sanctioned by the most powerful among us. If challenged, this thinking is justified on the grounds that we can or may do this because the human mind alone has the power to discern and then pursue its own interests above those of all other species. That in turn depends on our presupposing a fundamental difference between the minds

and bodies of some of us and between all of us and every other lifeform.

These presuppositions, based on long-held philosophical and religious claims to human distinctiveness and exceptionalism are explored at some length in *Exploring Earthiness*. The importance point about these concepts and all such concepts is that they remain largely implicit and therefore unquestioned in our culture. So it's only when I started taking Locke to pieces so to speak and looking at his arguments that our reason and our soul give us the licence to behave as proprietors of earth—and we are now looking at the result today—that you realize how totally *irrational* this behaviour actually is. That's philosophically.

Religiously, similarly, they have simply been taken for granted. And on closer inspection, it becomes clear that historically they have functioned and continue to function within western culture in particular as a basis for certain male historic claims to supremacy over women, children, slaves, indigenous peoples and, implicitly and explicitly, over land and sea and all the other-than-human life that they sustain. Now while there has been some headway in redressing the effects of these claims in regard to interhuman relationships, the underlying assumption for their unquestioning acceptance in regard to our own earthiness became clear to me when, after Rio, over twenty years ago in 1992, I came back with a copy of the *Indigenous Peoples' Declaration of Interdependence* and I presented that to a conference hosted by a Christian community.

Its opening statement—‘We are Earth: the people, plants and animals, rains and oceans, breath of the forest and flow of the sea’—was met with shufflings, murmurs and finally, open rejection: ‘We’re not “Earth”! We’re human beings! We have souls!’ This cultural self-perception was then reluctantly qualified into modified versions and mutterings such as: ‘Oh well, we live on Earth and belong to it while we’re here but we really belong in heaven’ . . . Or: ‘We own parts of Earth and depend on its resources and we’re entitled to use them, but’ . . . Or simply: ‘God gave us Earth to use for our support and benefit.’

In fact, in Genesis, the last command that God gives Adam and Eve—see we have been so taken up with this supposed sin and all the rest of it that we don’t actually notice what God says in chapter 3:31. The best translation of the Hebrew is, ‘Serve the Earth from which you were made.’ So against that, we have the kind of self-understanding that boils down at that conference to variations on: We alone have souls and minds and intellects that set us apart from or distinguish us from or raise us above all earthly creatures.

Now at that time, I did not assume, nor would I today, that these reactions followed from a close reading of John Locke! In fact, as a devout Christian, he merely reinforced assumptions that have underpinned our culture for so long that they have not only structured our interactions and relationships with the more-than-human world. They have supported working relationships between us that at various times in western human history allowed and still allow some

of us to degrade other humans through racial, hierarchical and sexist cultural assumptions about them.

This hierarchical cultural paradigm has become an industry now called 'genealogy', focussed on 'who' we think we are, in total isolation from any sod on which we may have stood or walked or anything else or depended—'who' we are rather than 'what' we are. This reinforces distinctions between ourselves and all other creatures and justifies claims to our entitlement to and unrestricted use of this or that part of Earth's resources. And this holds sway more than a century after the supposed acceptance of Darwin's own findings about the earthly origin of *all* species exposed the underlying falsity of such claims. He concluded:

that while this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.

Most beautiful and most wonderful. This evokes a resplendent idea of God, of Earth and of ourselves. It echoes Patrick's testimony and its all-embracing vision of life on Earth: and of ourselves as but one of those forms ,that evolved and continue to evolve on this planet from so simple a beginning: although from our present scientific perspective, Darwin's description of that 'beginning' as 'simple' appears a slight understatement! The important point here is that while Darwin's declaration of our 'simple' earthly beginnings and its global implications for humanity has been scientifically ratified, intellectually argued for and

accepted as part of the western cultural realm of ideas, its significant (albeit implicit) rejection of a self-image based on human exceptionalism is in direct conflict now with our inherited religious and cultural understanding of who and what we are. Teilhard de Chardin diagnosed both the problem and the solution when he said:

Blessed be you, mighty matter, irresistible march of evolution, reality ever new-born; you who, by constantly shattering our mental categories, force us to go ever further and further in the pursuit of truth.

The problem is, quite simply, that of *consistently* shattering those ‘mental categories’ in regard to ourselves; of questioning their truth when the truth now pursued through science takes us deeper and deeper into analyses, dissections and break-downs of the atomic structure of life itself. At the same time, while the dialectic of enlightenment has given us overarching mental categories, like ‘soul’, ‘reason’ and ‘property’, to refer to values and goals for human individuals and societies, these fail to provide us with a wider vision of our own lives that connects them positively and, indeed, reverentially and resplendently, with other-than-human earthly lives and all of them with God.

In that vision of a resplendent earth, I would like us to conclude with a wonderful expression of it from the indigenous native American peoples. And I would like us to join with this in the hope that their vision becomes an integral part of ours.

Greetings and thanks
To each other as people
To the Earth, mother of all
Greetings and thanks
To all the waters, waterfalls and rain
Rivers and oceans
Greetings and thanks
To all the fish life
Greetings and thanks
The grains and greens, Beans and berries
As one we send thanks
To food plants medicine herbs of the world
And their keepers
Greetings and thanks
To all animals and their teachings
Greetings and thanks
The trees for shelter and shade
Fruit and beauty
Greetings and thanks
To all birds large and small
Joyful greetings and thanks
And from the four directions
The four winds
Thank you for purifying the air we breathe
And giving us strength
Greetings

The thunderers
Our grandfathers in the sky
We hear your voices
Greetings and thanks

And now the sun for the light of a new day
And all the fires of life
Greetings and thanks

To our oldest grandmother the moon
Leader of women all over the world
And the stars for their mystery, Beauty and guidance
Greetings and thanks

To our teacher from all times
Reminding us of how to live in harmony
Greetings and thanks

And for all the gifts of creation
For all the love around us
Greetings and thanks

And for that which is forgotten
We remember

We end our words
Now our minds are one

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