

## **Reflections on Water.**

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Think of all the ways you use water in one day. We depend on water for cleansing everything, and for nourishment, cooking, recreation and aesthetic pleasures. Add up the ways societies use water; food services, agriculture, industrial, transportation, religious rituals, entertainment, imagery in art, or vacation spots. Our relationship to water is daily, steady, and multiple. I want to explore four dimensions of water, beyond our use of it.

### **The Nature of Water:**

What is water? The Earth is between 4.4 - 4.1 billion years old. Over hundreds of millions of years, the Earth developed from dust particles to a large, hot, molten planet with a thin rocky crust. The climate was sulphuric, toxic to life as we know it, and at boiling temperatures, for millions upon millions of years. As steam began to condense the miracle of rain and weather cycles begin. The first rains fell. Then torrential rains fell until rivers ran over the surface and pooled into great seas. For 300 million years it rained on the Earth - day and night, cooling the surface. This process created a stable climate structure - a hydrologic or water-logic cycle - a connection between the surface, the air, and the land. The atmospheric processes are what has kept the Earth alive, by containing hydrogen and oxygen and preventing them from drifting into space, as on Mars.

From space the planet is blue, with bits of green. Seventy four (74.4%) percent of the Earth's surface is water, and 97.2% of that is ocean. Water is the basic structure of the planet. Of the 2.8% of fresh water, 90% is in glaciers and underground ice sheets. That leaves .0001% of fresh water available to all life forms. The waters of the Earth exist in a closed system; no more fresh water can be added to the cycle.

Water is a raw material of creation. 3500 million years ago, the watery, chemical brew brought forth invisibly small creatures adept at 'stealing' energy, and remaking molecular structures. The emergence of life and the presence of water are intimately bonded. Most life originated in the oceans. The salt in our blood is the history of the emergence of life

from the salty oceans - literally. All life is related to water. Mammals, including humans still emerge from water - the embryonic fluids. Water flows through our bodies, our memories, and every cell of every life form.

Water exists in an ever moving cycle - delicately balanced - where the sun causes water to rise as vapour from the oceans, cool, and fall back on the Earth as fresh water, returning to the ocean. The entire climate system with its gravitational pull towards the Earth, is integrated within the hydrologic system. The parts are a dynamic of the whole cycle that nourishes, purifies and cleanses. Living organisms are active participants in this cycle - absorbing and filtering water molecules - and breathing water vapour. With breath-taking genius and creativity each life form relates to water in specific, and extremely diverse, ecosystems.

The relationships between forests and water are a staggering example of the stunning gracefulness of the Earth's system. Rain falls onto the trees and descends into the roots systems, the soil and organisms, and is then taken up into the trunk and leaves. The sophisticated photosynthesis process (one that took the Earth two billion years to fine-tune) releases oxygen and excess water vapour, now purified. Large forests are their own ecosystems, and demonstrate the purification systems, life-cycles and wizardry of water. This is one reason why deforestation has a major impact on water availability, soil erosion, pollution in rivers and ground water, and an overall loss of available fresh water.

The equilibrium of water systems everywhere is finely tuned. In our bodies sophisticated systems retain, eliminate or evaporate water. Babies are 75% water, men 64% and women 58% water. Water is in every part of our bodies - in every cell, blood, spinal fluid, and digestive workings. Most of the foods we eat are water: a tomato is 95% water, milk is 90% water, apples are 85% water and even potatoes are 80% water!

Water is very simple: two hydrogen and one oxygen molecule, yet it is a physical anomaly. It has a high internal cohesion, with a large oxygen and two small hydrogen molecules. The oxygen has a positive charge and the hydrogen is negative, so that they can bond with another oxygen - in a complex pattern with an infinite variety of combinations. At room

temperatures water is a liquid. Most other substances are either solid or a gas. Water can exist simultaneously as a liquid, a solid and as a vapour within a large temperature range. It can absorb large amounts of energy without evaporating and it cools slowly. Oceans regulate the Earth's temperature by storing heat in summer and releasing it in winter. Even the whiteness of snow and ice (solid water) and white clouds (water vapour) reflects rather than absorbs sunlight and energy, keeping temperatures stable. The next time you get very cold or very hot - understand that it is the water in your body preventing you from dehydrating, freezing or boiling to death!

Water is denser as a liquid than a solid, while most other liquids sink in solid form. Solid water - ice - floats and expands. Ice insulates the oceans, prevents evaporation, keeps the temperature stable and enables aquatic life to survive the winter. Snow and ice prevent the Earth from warming too quickly. In early spring, the snow allows water to seep slowly into the ground rather than evaporating, and nourish plant roots. Within the whole Earth system, water both absorbs heat and transports warm water through huge ocean currents to warm other parts of the Earth.

Because water is 'water', it is the universal solvent. Water can dissolve minerals and organic compounds. It can carry pollutants through the hydrologic cycle. Because the water cycle is omnipresent, so are the contaminants.

Water - source of life. If we could ponder, even for a few seconds, the Earth within these time frames.... four billion, hundreds of millions of years..... we gain a perspective, and some needed humility. If we can ponder, even briefly, the nature and story of water, we gain some appreciation for the elegance of water system, and for the stunning gracefulness and indeed genius within Earth's systems. Those who study water use images of the living Earth, Gaia, a self-organizing universe, an Earth dance, mother Earth, or the story of the Earth. There is a need to return to an appreciation and understanding of the whole. Water teaches us about the whole, as it flows through, sustains and cleanses all - really it all. We can speak of sacred waters - not just as a symbol - because water is the sustainer of life. It is the common good.

Water water everywhere, but not a drop to drink.

## **The Politics of Water**

The cleansing systems of the Earth can no longer purify the water. In some areas the contaminant levels within water are far beyond saturation point. One glass of water from Lake Ontario contains billions of toxic molecules and over three hundred known toxic chemicals. North Americans are carrying at least five hundred chemicals in their bodies that were unknown before World War I. Waste water from cities returns to the earth with 200 synthetic chemicals in the rivers. Detergents and organic chlorine compounds are responsible for sexual mutations in fish.

The Earth's water systems of lakes or rivers, as well as the immense underground aquifers, are constantly moving. To contaminate ground water is to contaminate all water, and gives us pesticide-laced rain drops, as said Rachel Carson. A few molecules of PCB released in the water in Big Spring, Texas travelled through various water-ways and ended up in seals, polar bears and the breast milk of the Inuktitut peoples in the northern isolated island of Broughton: there is no safe uncontaminated place. Over 8 million people die annually of water-borne illnesses. The death of plant life, mammals, amphibians, insects, birds and fish is immeasurable.

There are two regulation levels for water pollution; industry and human health. It is always a compromise between economics and public safety. The enforceable maximums are negotiated within industry and economic targets, and health levels are rarely enforced. Pollutants include everything from dry cleaning fluids, herbicides, PCB's, and plasticizers to toxic leaching and dumping. Most water systems contain carcinogenic compounds to varying degrees. There are no standard procedures for assessing the chemical soups in most water-ways, and yet exposure to one compound affects the body's ability to detoxify another. There are regulations for toxins in food that do not apply to water, yet water often is contaminated from agricultural processes. Some pesticides are banned in foods, but are readily found in water: - wells, and tap, bottled, or ground water. Many of the toxins will never break down. They move up the food chain to a million-fold concentration in humans and other mammals. This process is called bioaccumulation. Eating a trout from Lake Michigan, a

person absorbs, in only one meal, more PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) than a lifetime of drinking water from the lake.

Other water issues are the problems with aqua-farming and agrobusiness; diseases, soil erosion, pesticides, acid rain, irrigation systems and the rerouting of rivers that disrupt entire ecosystems. Road salt is a huge water and soil problem. Aquifer mining is causing water tables to drop. The global transporting of water for potable or agricultural usage brings microscopic creatures to foreign ecosystems. There is toxic dumping in oceans, birds dying because of polluted waters on migratory routes, insects are diminishing, and the reproductive systems of many fish, frogs and amphibians are damaged.

There is the fixation on bottled water. In some places it is needed. But usually bottled water is not cleaner than the available water, and the cost, the production of plastics (petroleum), the garbage created and transported, the mining of aquifers and draining of wetlands are causing far more social and ecological problems than they are solving. Corporations are also buying up tracts of public land, wetlands, farmlands, wilderness lands, and water systems and using these for export or bottled water (Coca Cola, Pepsi, Nestles, etc.,).

There are enormous ecological and social problems from mega dams that destroy the finely balanced ecological and hydrologic system - and now wells are dry, and water is salinated or toxic. The effects of climate change is already disrupting water patterns, temperature changes, irregular storms, and too much or too little rainfall

Pollutants and water disruptions are very serious problems. To pollute the waters of the world is to pollute all life forms. To destroy the water cycle is to upset something of the nature of genius, something far superior to human intelligence. Some are looking to the Earth to learn its ways. For example although most industrialized countries chlorinate polluted water, the Earth has sophisticated decontamination processes. The work of John Todd and the Living Machines for water purification show how to learn from and imitate the Earth's water-ways.

Privatization

Today 1.1 billion people lack access to clean drinking water, and 2.4 billion lack access to sanitation, mostly in Africa and Asia. Today 1/3 world's people live in areas that are water stressed, and 50 % of countries have experienced water shortages. The World Health Organization, the United Nations, and the World Bank predict that within 20 years over 2/3 of the world's people will experience severe potable water shortages. This does not include animals and plants. Water consumption far exceeds renewable water resources in industrialized countries, and water sources are diminishing by overuse, misuse, and pollution. Clean water is becoming scarce, and is getting worse. What is scarce is valuable. Privatizing water supplies is a source of immediate profit. Because water is necessary, everyday, everywhere and by everyone it is ideal as a commodity. We can boycott genetically modified canola, we can rearrange our food intake somewhat, we can refuse to buy NIKE shoes, but we cannot do without water.

Water, in most traditional worldviews, is part of the commons. It is not considered a right but a necessity - a free gift. Even in areas of chronic water scarcity or political conflicts there are long traditions of generosity and water hospitality. But now water is a commodity. It is a 'good', an investment or a service. At times it is a need - but never a right - because a right cannot enter into trade agreements.

In the past decade water has become a commodity. Everywhere in the world public services are encouraged to become private. Waste management is the entry point for many corporations. When municipalities, where water is usually controlled, cannot provide the needed services, they sell waste management facilities. It is a small move to then buy the water treatment plants, and then the access to water itself. Privatizing the water systems is the first step towards privatising the water sources. In most countries waste and potable water systems are not separate. (Germany is an exception.) When potable water is privately owned, then the access to water is controlled. This means that the water sources are owned.

Although there are many corporate water players, the water barons are the most aggressive: Vivendi Environment, Suez, or Suez Lyonnaise des Eaux from France, Thames or RWE from Germany, and Bechtel from the US. These companies have different names in different countries. In

1990, 51 million people got their water from private companies. In 2003 it was more than 300 million. The World Bank, The International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation desire the privatization of public services, and give corporations huge loans for water privatization. The World Bank has lent 30\$ billion in the past 12 years for water privatization. National democracies are almost ineffectual in the face of these global structures.

What happens? Prices go up immediately. In Sibic bay, Philippines the prices went up 400 % and in France, 150 %. In England the consumer experienced a 450 % hike while company profit increases of 692% and the CEO salaries went up 708 %! Water is cut off if people cannot pay. In England service disconnection increased by 50 %. On the west coast of South Africa, over 10 million people had their water cut off for various periods since privatization in 1994. Yet water is essential, so people find other sources. In one instance 250,000 people became ill with cholera, and 300 died. At times the new water systems are unclean. In England water-borne dysentery increased six fold after privatization. In France 5.2 million people received bacterially unacceptable water.

Privatization, although mostly concentrated in the poorer countries has moved into the North American and mainstream European markets. All are on a contract per city basis. Yet it is a worldwide expansion, and only possible with the help of the World Bank and other international financial institutions. In some places corporations are developing a two-tiered system of basic and extended water services. If you pay more you get more and cleaner water.

There are a few well known cases of resistance. In Cochabamba, Bolivia, the city water works were sold to Aguas del Tunari, (Bechtel and United Utilities), giving them control of the ground water, including private wells. Public water prices went up immediately. Resistance began with petitions, meetings, alternative programs and finally street protests. In the end there were riots, the army came in, some people were killed and the government reluctantly cancelled the agreement. The corporation is suing for lost profit, legitimate under the trade agreements. In Hamilton, Ontario, the mayor wanted to be 'economically progressive' and decided to privatize its water in 1995, mostly for export but also as a cost-effective

water and waste water services. Lay offs began within a year, cutting half of the 130 workers. Then environmental problems began, and in 1996 untreated sewage spills began in earnest. Now there are individuals suing, environmental regulations are broken; there is an endless stream of unpaid fines, and still poor water management. Over 8 years the water company changed hands five times. They are trying to get out of the deal. Moncton has partially privatized, Halifax has signed, and Vancouver is debating a public-private partnership. The Walkerton water crisis is due more to provincial deregulation of water quality. Deregulation and staff shortages are a first step towards selling public services to private companies.

There are related problems that make resolving water issues difficult. The trade agreements penalize cities that want to reverse privatization. For example, the Sun Belt Water company applied to export water from British Columbia, and the Canadian government refused. Using NAFTA Canada is being sued for \$600 million in lost **future** profits. In another case, Methanex (a Canadian company with US subsidiaries) is suing the US government for \$1.3 billion (\$970 million US). Methanex produces a gasoline additive called MBTE, (methyl tertiary butyl ether) which is being banned in California because it is toxic. It is linked to cancers and possible neurological and dermatological problems. California claims MBTE is a health hazard, yet Methanex says there is no conclusive proof. Under NAFTA If one scientist dissents, there is no proof, although 11 states are in the process of banning it. MBTE has leached into the water table in thousands of places. Instead of Methanex being concerned that they would be sued for the closing of municipal wells in Santa Monica and the sickness caused, they are suing the federal government for substantial interference with Methanex, or expropriation as described in chapter 11 of NAFTA. The corporation is the victim, claiming damages for present and future financial losses. NAFTA negotiations and tribunals take place in private, among trade lawyers, and at the federal level. Not only are citizens' voices excluded, but provinces or states have no jurisdiction in the debate.

It is important to learn about water privatization issues, and excellent material is available; the Council of Canadians and the Polaris Institute. There are emerging international citizen's movements, such as the World Social Forum, rising up to face the corporate mega-structure, and

addressing many issues including water. There are resistance movements, and some success stories.

There are dozens more ways to address water issues, such as the patterns and predictions of water scarcity or quality, agricultural issues and irrigation, food supplies, energy requirements, or the rise of health issues from water. One could examine water and geopolitical changes, population growth, urbanization, industry, globalization, or technology. There are problems between water and climate change, ecosystems and manipulations of water ways, mega-dams, and water-related disasters. Water and biodiversity are intimately related, and the issues facing human health and water also affect many other species in interdependent ecosystems: a frequently ignored dimension. Other important issues are water and lifestyle, consumption, recreation and tourism. Water and security clearly related. We could study water policies at regional, national and global levels, and from the viewpoints of economics, governance, and social movements. We could, perhaps should, study the World Bank Water Economics documents and their 'water economics methodology, tools and applications'! Which ever entry point we choose these realities are interrelated, and water is now a necessary part of all these discussions. The future depends on what decisions are made. Addressing water issues is challenging because the problems are enormous, and because they must be countered ecologically, economically, internationally, ideologically, and spiritually.

### **Spirituality and Water**

You will become a source of living water. Still waters run deep. You will become a fountain of living water. Justice will flow like a mighty river. .. longing for running water.

Water is the source of life, and is truly living water. Water is a sacred symbol in all religions, and is frequently used in images, prayers, teachings, rituals, and religious texts. Water teaches about the sacred, about the divine milieu in which we live. Water teaches about cleansing and nourishing our spirit, about peace and justice, and about social change. Yet religious groups interested in water rarely talk of water as sacred.

Christian groups, such as Development and Peace are addressing water, and the concerns over privatization. While water and social justice are crucial to survival, to draw deep from the sources of spirituality brings profound insights, energy and a heightened awareness of a sense of the Divine that permeates the Earth.

#### Christian Theological Resources:

There are many theological resources that could be brought to bear on ecological issues in general and on water in particular. Four will be mentioned: a theology of creation; biblical themes, inter-religious efforts; and religious experience.

#### 1) A Theology of Creation

Christian traditions have numerous teachers who addressed the whole of creation, from Hildegard of Bingen and Thomas Aquinas to Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Berry, Sallie McFague, Larry Rasmussen and Rosemary Radford Ruether. To address 'creation' is to be aware of the emergent universe and that this is integral to a sacred, creative and life-giving process. From Genesis to current evolutionary theories, the emergent processes of life are inter-connected and divinely inspired, and the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. It ALL matters. Creation theology has been neglected for centuries, until recently, as Christian traditions have over-emphasized the redemption of humanity and have almost forgotten about the tradition of creation. Although there is a 'doctrine' of creation is not particularly helpful in ecological matters because the doctrine refers to the philosophical insights of creation *ex nihilo* - out of nothing. It is not about the actual universe and the Earth coming into being, which is a later understanding of creation. It is useful to distinguish between the doctrine of creation and a theology of creation.

Increasingly ecological theologians are reinterpreting creation theology in light of current evolutionary knowledge of the universe, the Earth and the ecological crisis. It is an urgent need to become aware, once again, of the sacred whole. This leads to insights about our part within the whole and not our superiority to it. Creation theology reminds us of our place within the scheme of life, enlarges our appreciation for all of life, and increases our awareness of being inter-connected to multitude modes of divine presence.

The World Council of Churches chose the theme Peace Justice and the Integrity of Creation as a galvanizing image to make connections between ecological and social issues. From an ecological viewpoint, 'integrity of creation' allows room for different theological and ecological paradigms - from stewardship to cosmological. Stewardship is a both a biblical theme as well as a comfortable ecological paradigm for many Christians. The ecological crisis is understood predominantly a problem of resources, and responsible stewardship and resource management are appropriate responses. Theologically, stewardship is about caring for God's creation. Humanity joins with God as a co-creator, and jointly we care for creation. Stewardship is a light green paradigm, meaning that it maintains anthropocentrism. God's project remains human centered, and little intrinsic or sacred value is attached to the natural world. Stewardship mobilizes Christians to protect 'dwindling resources'. It does not challenge fundamental precepts of Christianity or of mainstream society.

A cosmological paradigm begins with the emergent universe, and considers the whole process of the emergence of the Earth and life on Earth. It is a dark green paradigm as it does not accept that the divine plan is only human-centered; rather it is about the whole. Rosemary Radford Ruether describes cosmology as;

a view of the relation of humans to the rest of nature, their relation to each other in society, and their relation to the ultimate foundational source of life (the divine). They have been blueprints for what today we would call a combined scientific, social-ethical, and theological-spiritual worldview. (Ruether, 1992, p. 32).

Creation theology can accommodate both ends of the ecological spectrum. It is biblically sound, established within Christian traditions, and can motivate change. From creation theology one can see the many ways water can be appreciated: its ecological role in the whole Earth processes, its life-giving capacity, as a common good, and as constitutive of all creation.

## 2) Biblical Themes:

a) Jubilee: The theme of jubilee, activated by many Christian traditions, is a wonderful tool for ecological and social change. The Canadian Ecumenical Jubilee Initiative provided splendid resources on how jubilee

can be reinterpreted. The principles of equitable sharing of resources, of letting the land lie fallow, and of ecological sustainability are part of 'jubilee' and easily applied to current issues. During the three year ecumenical Jubilee project, people were moved, their worldview transformed their sense of the sacred expanded, and a successful political campaign ensued. The jubilee initiative mobilized people and brought issues together such that a transformative image and effort became possible. For water, jubilee was helpful to address the concerns of sustainability, equitable access, ceasing pollution and honouring the Earth.

B) Prophetic traditions: Among central biblical themes is that of the prophet; the one who calls in the wilderness that change is needed. Prophets always call people back to the core insights of their traditions, and to the present situation. They speak for the concerns of others, and represent conversion, repentance, justice, restoration and vision. Prophets remind us that we have limited our understanding and experience of the divine. There are prophets of hope and those of doom and gloom; both representing dimensions of the ecological crisis. In terms of water, the doom and gloom scenarios are crucial to hear, as well as joining with the prophetic resistance movements bringing hope. Prophets are needed to awaken Christian communities to the issues of water - in its ecological, social and spiritual dimensions. The Earth needs prophets who will speak of its beauty, elegance, ingenuity, sacredness and suffering, including but not limited to human concerns. The prophetic tradition is a potent resource for Christians.

C) Liberation and Justice:

The bible is replete with stories, teachings and insights about liberation and justice. This is the most common rubric for progressive Christian communities and for liberation or political theology types, where analyses of justice and socio-economics are central. The shift to eco-justice has been of great value to assist Christians in addressing ecological concerns. Ecojustice analyses reveal how deeply the ecological crisis is entangled with economics, globalization, and indeed much of the 'production' of industrialized countries. The economic paradigm is often pitted against ecological health. Ecological sustainability is frequently presented in opposition to jobs; fisheries, logging, or agriculture. Pollution limits are lifted for corporate jobs and profit. The economy is kept rolling with a

pathological indifference to the ecological costs. In developing countries the severity of the ecology-economic web is at the level of access to clean water, arable soil or healthy food. The 'fight' against the rise of pollution-related respiratory illnesses, reproductive and skin cancers, and a host of environmental illnesses means that Christians have to tackle business and governments to achieve adequate regulations on water, pesticides, toxic dumping, GMO-free foods, etc. The examples are endless. As well, ecological problems are deeply enmeshed with other systemic social problems, such as discrimination based on ethnicity, class or gender.

Ecojustice addresses these in terms of equitable access to and distribution of the Earth's resources. The religious insight or principle brought to bear is liberation and justice. This approach uncovers more layers of the ecological crisis than does stewardship. The limitation is that ecojustice tends only to deal with human realities, and ignores the profound sufferings and injustices to the whole Earth community of life. The extinction of species, now up to 60,000 per year, the environmental illnesses and decimation of large mammals, and the collapse of elaborate and biodiverse ecosystems does not register because the natural world has little innate or sacred value.

In the monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) God is a God of liberation. These religions have an impulse of liberation at their core, and a claim for justice. At their radical edge they operate in counter-cultural forms that propel justice forward in history. As Rabbi Heschel says, 'to be religious is to be impatient with injustices, a breathless impatience with injustice, a hysteria about injustices'.

We ourselves witness continually acts of injustice, manifestations of hypocrisy, falsehood, outrage, misery, but we rarely get indignant or overly excited. To the prophets a minor, commonplace sort of injustice assumes almost cosmic proportions."( Dresner, 1997, 80.)

D) Preferential option for the poor: Christian social movements and liberation theologians developed the theme of God's preferential option for the poor. There is much biblical support for this insight. Ecotheologians now speak of a preferential option for the Earth, meaning that to opt for the whole Earth is to opt for all life, including humanity. The Earth is suffering, and the bounteous, beautiful communities of life - that sustain and contain all human realities - are diminishing. Even from a practical

viewpoint, to destroy the Earth's capacity to sustain complex life-forms is to destroy ourselves. In addition, it is the poor peoples of the Earth who suffer immediately and most from ecological stress. A preferential option for the poor invites one to delve deeply into the causes, ideologies and practices that create and maintain oppressive systems, and to transform them. The ecological crisis, while also a resource, economic and justice problem, is also about the worldview and entire orientation of Euro-western countries. It is most difficult for these anthropocentric cultures to acknowledge and honour a sacred dimension to the Earth. Thus a preferential option for the poor is a perspective from which many ecological issues can become concerns for Christians.

E) Wisdom Literature: Wisdom literature is often about specific religious experiences, as seen in Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon. All of these texts are full of images and teachings of the Sacred and the natural world being deeply intertwined. Such texts reveal that a great deal of our sense of the Sacred is derived from our experiences of the Earth. The Earth is experienced as being of splendor, beauty, adventure, power, creativity, and sacred.

F) God is for Life: A powerful theological resource is the conviction that God is a God of Life. While interpreted differently throughout the centuries, the past fifty years have seen a revolution in Christian understanding of what it means to see God as for life. It has led Christians to appreciate the diversity of the human community, to respect otherness, to encounter rather than convert, to support praxis that allows life to flourish, and, to resist that which diminishes the possibilities and potential to live. It has allowed followers to hope against despair and to move the unmovable. This basic axiom needs to be expanded to include all life where the human is not the central reference point, and where human flourishing is part of the flourishing of an Earth community. God is a God for all life.

#### 4) Inter-religious Efforts.

From the first Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions in 1893 to the present, inter-religious dialogue has grown in form, content and consciousness. The ecological crisis is calling forth a further consciousness and novel forms of inter-religious cooperation, and the

emphasis is more on affecting public policy than on inter-religious exchange. The era of disparate and divided religious traditions needs to be over, if only to counter the rise in religious fundamentalism. While each religion has distinct contributions, common ground is necessary for the world to face such a global and intertwined crisis. It is conceivable to appreciate each religious tradition as offering specific insights and teachings within a tapestry of revelations (Berry, 1988). It is urgent that the Christian tradition reinterpret itself in light of the worlds' religions.

The world's religions are being called upon to address the spiritual and moral dimension of the ecological crisis. The World Watch Institute and the United Nations recognize religion as a significant force that could join with others to mitigate ecological ruin. Secular movements are integrating ecospirituality into their work. Canadian organizations such as the Sierra Club of Canada and the David Suzuki Foundation have explicitly connected spirituality from many traditions to their events. This challenge is generating new and unique types of inter-religious co-operation. While taking many shapes, there are several characteristics that describe what is occurring. Three will be mentioned briefly.

#### A) Form:

There is a shift occurring, moving from studying the histories, texts, doctrines, worldviews and differences to calling forth the spiritual resources of the world's religions to become a political force for an ecological sustainable future. There is an emerging alliance of religion and ecology, where resources are pooled rather than compared or analyzed. Academics are working increasingly in public policy. Inter-religious statements and policies are pressuring various organizations from local governments to the United Nations to deal more effectively with ecological problems.

The vision of the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions has expanded, and now represents commitments to a just, peaceful and sustainable world. To do this, a basis of ecological integrity is a prerequisite. Their first axiom is: The Earth and all life are cherished, protected, healed and restored.

#### B) Content:

The inter-religious and ecological conversations are raising many challenging aspects about the nature of religious knowledge. It is deeply unsettling for some to understand each religion as part of a tapestry of

revelations. It requires, at times, a relativising of specific truth claims and seeking a greater truth of the religious quest intrinsic to human consciousness and now within the Earth processes. There is a resurgence of interest and research into the nature of religion, and seeing a spiritual dimension to all reality embedded within the processes of life itself.

In the face of the ecological crisis, religions are engaging in in-depth evaluations of those aspects that have promoted or ignored ecological ruin. The ingrained anthropocentrism of some traditions, especially the monotheistic religions, is difficult to budge, particularly as much of the theological paradigm is based on the superiority of the human. To shift our gaze from the primacy of humanity to an awareness of the whole of life within an evolutionary paradigm can be theologically and personally strenuous. Yet anything less will be inadequate. A religious worldview in which the natural world is sacred and not secondary is what is required of religions today.

It is important to identify the transformative and prophetic insights of each tradition, and affirm the particular values that can assist collaborative responses to the ecological crises. This process, described by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim as that of critical understanding, empathetic appreciation and creative revisioning, is required to understand the multi-layered symbol systems in world religions. The central task is to align religious efforts, and the spectrum of cosmologies, symbols, rituals, values and ethical orientations, within the rhythms and limits of the natural world. This work is changing the content and consciousness of inter-religious understanding.

### C) A calling forth of ethics rather than dogma

Given the rapid rate of ecological destruction and the uncertainty of a sustainable future, we need a substantial change in religious attitudes towards the natural world. The work of rethinking the relationship of humans to the Earth, and the implications for economic patterns, equity and life-style, are urgent tasks. For those working in the inter-religious arena there has been a shift towards ethics. The challenge is to develop ethics that are not only human centered. Theologians, drawing from the ethical core and codes of each tradition are reshaping these invaluable and necessary resources to include the natural world in ethical considerations (Rasmussen, 1996 ).

This shift from dogma to ethics signifies a departure from both the content and the purpose of inter-religious cooperation. It orients the religious traditions to bring forth their greatest insights into a political arena, with the aim to influence action.

#### 4) Religious Experience; awe and wonder

At this time of human history it is pressing for all religious traditions to reclaim their roots in the natural world. Each tradition has an awareness that the natural world is a primary place of revelation and religious experience. The beauty and elegance of the natural world have been inspirational and revelatory of the divine since time immemorial. It is only in recent history that this has not been so. In addition, the sentiments of awe and wonder are renowned as the basis of religious experience. It goes by many other names; reverence, contemplation, great mystery, mysticism and so on. Religions need to rediscover their roots in the world of awe and wonder, as both integral to religious experience and decisive at the nexus of religion, ecology and politics.

Awareness of the power of wonder and awe is available to anyone who spends time in the natural world. Examples of such awareness are found in all religious traditions and are returning to consciousness in a new way in the face of the ecological crisis. For example, a Taoist insight affirms:

Those of us who contemplate the world soon come to have a great sense of wonder. The perfection of the stars, the beauty of mountains and streams, and the invigorating quality of clean ocean air fills us with feelings of celebration and reverence. Reverence only comes with experience and care. We must be responsible, and at the same time express the wonder of all that we know as human.

Wonder and awe lead to reverence, and reverence leads to responsibility and ethics. Reverence for and responsibility to the natural world is intimately connected to each other, and to authentic religious experience.

Fostering a deep ecological awakening is a central role religions could play today. This means both identifying existing resources - rituals, scriptures, ethics, symbols - and being attentive to emerging ones, such as the cosmological and feminist insights. It is imperative that religious leaders reawaken an awareness of a sacred presence active within the

Earth's sublime and sophisticated life systems, to which the appropriate response is 'awe'. To see and know the Earth as such requires a new way of perceiving, and a confidence that to experience a grove as sacred is not quaint, incidental, irrelevant, or even heretical. Religions need to reclaim their heritage, such that even the tiniest caterpillar is a book about God, as noted Meister Eckhart. Ecologically oriented religious voices affirm that this kind of awareness is not a luxury, but the basis of religious experience and a necessary piece of ethical deliberations and political motivation.

In mainstream culture to consider life as sacred is superfluous. It is legitimate to view life as a commodity and to discuss ecological ruin in credit and debit terms. Life is a market, not an intrinsic value. Yet this view is economically short-sighted, ecologically untenable, ethically reprehensible and religiously mistaken. The governing economic worldview needs to be countered with a more powerful and alluring understanding of life. In this view, the Earth and its life forms are not a set of resources; they are modes of divine presence. Here is where religions are crucial to get from here to there.

The primary mode of knowing in Western societies is analytic. Yet analysis has its limits. Analysis sheds light on aspects of a situation, and can expose patterns, systems, causes and effects, and unmasks power dynamics. But it cannot open the door to profound insights, to what can be known beyond all conventional knowing. Awe is a way of knowing. It is a dimension of life-experience and the essence of religious awareness. Yet it is often belittled, ignored or dismissed as socially relevant. It is acceptable as a private experience, not a revelatory moment, as a personal spirituality not a crucial dimension of religious investigation. Still, awe is intimately bound to the essence of religion. As Rabbi Heschel observed,

Awe is a sense for the transcendence, for the reference everywhere to the mystery in and beyond all things, It enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine. To sense the ultimate in the common and simple, to feel in the rush of the passing, the stillness of the eternal. What we cannot comprehend by analysis, we become aware of in awe (Dresner, 1997, p.3).

The capacity for awe remains omnipresent; a quiet eminence that radiates everywhere. It creates an unflinching and preeminent awareness of the extraordinary, abundant, unique and interconnected array of life.

To marvel at the natural world within the large horizon of the cosmic adventure - and to understand to what degree we are constitutionally embedded within this drama - requires a transcendence of our superficial worldviews and beliefs. Wonder and awe can become a way of seeing, and of informing our political visions. Herein lies the terrain of genuine new insights, energies, understandings, ethics, analyses and awareness. From here can emerge a dynamic and consequential political energy and orientation.

Nonetheless it remains that wonder and awe cannot be analyzed, only experienced. As comments Rabbi Heschel, 'to become aware of the ineffable is to part company with words'. He writes:

We can never sneer at the stars, mock the dawn or scoff at the totality of being. Sublime grandeur evokes unhesitating, unflinching awe. Away from the immense, cloistered in our own concepts, we may scorn and revile everything. But standing between Earth and sky, we are silenced by the sight (Dresner, 1997, p. 2).

#### Conclusion:

To address water from many viewpoints helps us realize that to tamper with water is physically stupid, morally reprehensible, and spiritually a desecration of the sacred. To ruin Earth's water is offensive beyond words. It makes us unworthy of the gift of life. To start a reflection on water with its ecological aspects opens new possibilities of understanding water and its issues, but within a new context where humans are not the reference point. The Earth is the primary reference point. To start with the nature of water puts life into perspective and teaches us that we are intrinsically of the Earth. To glimpse at the nature of water awakens reverence for this magnificent Earth. Reverence, respect, and humility are spiritual values, as well as providing needed energy for the work to address water issues. With a reverence for water - its simplicity, its sacredness, and within the genius of the Earth and its history - we can contemplate the dimensions of water and realize that we are held within the beauty and intricate patterns of water. This opens up a horizon where we touch wonder, awe, and sacredness, and releases deeper psychic and spiritual energy. From this awareness we can respond to the issues of privatization and pollution with deeper, more truthful and more effective responses.