THE THEOLOGICAL STRUCTURE OF CHRISTIAN FAITH AND THE FEASIBILITY OF A GLOBAL ECOLOGICAL ETHIC

by Gordon D. Kaufman

Abstract. Scientific evolutionary/ecological thinking is the basis for today's understanding that we are now in an ecological crisis. Religions, however, often resist reordering their thinking in light of scientific ideas, and this presents difficulties in trying to develop a viable global ecological ethic. In both the West and Asia religio-moral ecological concerns continue to be formulated largely in terms of traditional concepts rather than in more global terms, as scientific thinking about ecological matters might encourage them to do. The majority of this article is devoted to the kind of reformulation of Western Christian conceptions of God, humanity, and the relation between them that is necessary to address this problem. The question is then raised whether similar critical thinking about religio-moral issues raised by today's evolutionary/ecological scientific thinking is going on in Asian religions and whether it would be too presumptuous (in view of our colonial history) for us Westerners to ask for such rethinking. This leads to a final question: Without such transformations in religious traditions East and West, is the development of a truly global ecological ethic really feasible?

Keywords: Abrahamic religions; anthropocentric; Asian religions; biohistorical; creativity; evolutionary thinking; faith; global ecological ethic; God; image of God; modern sciences; nature; traditional dualisms; traditional religious terms.

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I do not intend in this essay to sketch out a possible global ecological ethic or to comment on efforts toward developing such an ethic. Rather, I take up three issues. First, in order to make clear what I take to be drastic implications of modern ecological thinking for traditional religious frames of orientation, I briefly outline some of the features of the received Christian thinking about God and the human that make its use in today's ecologically sensitive world problematic. Second, I propose some new models for thinking about God, humanity, and their relationship, models that will enable us to more effectively connect these two major Christian symbols to widely accepted ecological and other claims about how human existence in this world must today be understood. This will, third, put us into a position for a fresh take on what Christian faith in God might mean in today's pluralistic world, a take more appropriate for developing a global ecological ethic; and it will also help us see more clearly certain issues that must be faced as we seek to construct such an ethic.

A largely unspoken presupposition throughout much of Christian history has been that faith and theology are concerned basically with what we have come to call the existential issues of life—despair, anxiety, guilt, death, meaninglessness, sin, injustice, and so forth, problems that arise because we are self-conscious subjects and agents. Beliefs about God's power, righteousness, love, mercy, and forgiveness and about justification by faith addressed these issues of meaning, sinfulness, and finitude, thus enabling life to go on. This focus and imagery, I suggest, encourages an understanding of both the Christian God and Christian faith in fundamentally anthropocentric terms, as concerned largely with certain deep human problems.

The human-centered and personalistic character of Christian thinking is clearly expressed in the idea that we humans, unlike all other creatures, were made in the very image of God as the climax of creation and in the fact that the traditional conception of God was itself constructed on the model of the human agent. Thinking of humans as made in the image of God was not just employing a lovely metaphor. The metaphor provided a theological ground for a profoundly dualistic understanding of the human that has characterized Christian thinking through most of its history. Though we share bodiliness and animality with other parts of the creation, that which distinguishes us most clearly from the rest—our spirituality, our mentality—images God's own spiritual being, it was believed. What is most important about us is that we are souls—spirits—and thus uniquely related to those heavenly beings whom we will join when, in death, we depart this physical world. God himself (I use the male pronoun intentionally here, in articulating the traditional understanding of God), a kind of cosmic spirit, loves humankind and for this reason entered directly into human history to bring salvation to us. Because of this intimate unique connection of God and the human in the traditional Christian symbol

system, we can (it was thought) have confidence that there will always be a Christian answer to every really important issue that might arise for women and men anywhere and everywhere. With God—the very creator of the heavens and the earth, the ultimate power in the cosmos—so uniquely interconnected with us humans, how could it be otherwise?

Today, however, we find ourselves in a period beset by serious issues significantly different from these existential problems of our subjectivity and agency. With the advent of the atomic age a half century ago, a great many things began to change. It became evident that we had attained the power to destroy the very conditions that make human life (and much other life as well) possible, and the notion that God would save us from ourselves as we pursued this self-destructive project became increasingly implausible. Though the nuclear threat has receded somewhat, the problem it symbolized has grown more pressing with our discovery, beginning for most of us about thirty years ago, that, whether there is a nuclear holocaust or not, we are now rapidly destroying the ecological conditions apart from which much of life cannot exist. Moreover, it seems clear that it is we humans who are responsible for this situation. Humanity, we are beginning to understand, is deeply situated within the evolutionary-ecological life processes on planet Earth, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to imagine God as one who might—or even can—directly transform and make right what we are so rapidly destroying. So it is not really evident that God (as Christians have traditionally understood God) provides a solution to the major problem facing us today: the ecological crisis.

This issue is different in kind from any that Christians (or any other humans) have ever faced, and continuing to worship and serve a God thought of as the omnipotent savior from all the evils of life may even get in the way of our seeing clearly its depths and significance. Today the most important issue is not how we can find a way to live with or overcome despair or meaninglessness or guilt or sinfulness, or human suffering generally, however significant these profound problems of human subjectivity may be. Now it is a matter of the *objective* conditions that make all life, including human life, possible: we are destroying them, and it is we who must find a way to reverse the ecologically destructive momentums we have brought into being.

This is not just a specifically Christian or theistic problem; it is a problem in which all humans are implicated, and we are all called to do our part in its solution. So the central religious issue confronting humankind today is of a different order than ever before. And Christians may no longer claim to have a corner on the solution to it; nor do Buddhists, or Jews, or the adherents of any other religion. What is now required is a reordering of the whole of human life around the globe in an ecologically responsible manner—something heretofore never contemplated by any of our great religious (or secular) traditions. All of humankind must learn to

work together on this issue, or it will simply not be taken care of. This is one reason why the development of a global ecological ethic is so important.

We may not be able, of course, to solve the ecological problem at all; we may already be past the point of no return. Moreover, we cannot suppose any longer that there will be a distinctively Christian (or other traditional) answer to this question; we have to think through afresh what Christian theology, as well as other religious and secular orientations, can contribute to its satisfactory address. Theology now becomes an essentially *constructive* task in the face of a heretofore unimagined situation, and the symbol systems of our various religious and secular traditions, in terms of which we humans do our thinking and acting and worshipping, have to be reconsidered in light of these problems that so urgently demand our attention.

It is not difficult to understand why the orientations of most religions, including traditional Christian faith and the symbol system that provided the structure of that faith, were basically human-centered. Our faith structures, our basic human stances in the world, however diverse they may be in our many different cultures, were all created by human beings (not deliberately and self-consciously, of course) as they sought ways, over many generations, to adapt to the various contingencies in life. It should not surprise us, therefore, that the basic focus of these orientations (including Christian) was on what would facilitate survival of the community—the tribe, the people—who worked together and faced the problems of life together, who sensed that they belonged together. The God of Israel, for example—Yahweh—was originally a savior-God who (it was believed) brought the people of Israel out of Egypt in dramatic displays of power and led them into military victory as they invaded Canaan, the land that Yahweh had promised them. Yahweh was the one on whom they could always call when life became unbearable, horrible, unintelligible—think of the many cries to Yahweh in the Psalms, in Job, in Jeremiah, and elsewhere throughout the Hebrew scriptures. The Christian story, when it appeared, built on this heritage, maintaining that God was so deeply involved in the human project on Earth that he came down to Earth in the person of the man Jesus to rescue humankind from all the evils of life, bringing an eternal life of perfect human fulfillment. The whole story here—the very idea of God in these traditions—is thoroughly human-centered. God is imagined primarily in terms of metaphors drawn from human life—lord, king, father, mighty warrior, and so on; humans thought of themselves as made, in their distinctiveness from the rest of creation, in the very "image and likeness" of this God; and God's activities were centrally concerned with human life and its deepest problems.

This kind of deep structure in the God-human symbolic complex that underlies and forms the faith-consciousness and faith-sensibility in the three Abrahamic religions—and is most powerfully accentuated in Christian faith,

because of the centrality there of God's incarnation in Christ—inevitably gives rise to a fundamental tension (indeed a conceptual and logical incompatibility) between, on the one hand, this received understanding of God and of the intimate relation of humanity to God, and, on the other hand, our growing awareness that human existence is essentially constituted by and could not exist apart from the complex ecological ordering of life that has evolved on Earth over many millennia. I want to spell this out a bit further.

The symbol *God*—not *nature*, it is important to note—functioned during most of Western history as the ultimate point of reference in terms of which all human life, indeed all reality, was to be understood.[1] God was believed to be the creator of the heavens and the earth (as Genesis 1 puts it), the creator of "all things visible and invisible" (as declared in some of the creeds), the lord of the world. It was, therefore, in terms of *God's* purposes and *God's* acts that human existence and life—in point of fact, all of reality—were to be comprehended; and human existence was to be oriented most fundamentally on this transworldly reality *God*, not on anything in the world (that is, in the order of nature). To orient ourselves and our lives on anything other than God and God's acts was deemed idolatry—a turning away from the very source and ground of humanity's being and life, and a direct violation of God's will for humankind. However, as the context and ground of human life becomes increasingly thought of in evolutionary and ecological terms, as in modernity and postmodernity, *nature* becomes a direct rival of God for human attention and devotion.

For many centuries, nature and God were not in any sort of significant tension with each other, since what we today speak of as nature was thought of as God's creation—the finite order—in every respect a product of God's creative activity and at all points completely at God's sovereign disposal. The concept of an autonomous nature, as we think of it today, had no real place in the biblical story at all. It is, rather, Yahweh and Israel, God and humanity—or even, especially in the individualism of much Western Christendom, God and the individual soul (as Augustine emphasized)—that are the realities of central interest and concern in the Christian religion. The divine-human relation is clearly the axis around which all else revolves. And in the end when God will create "new heavens and a new earth" (Isaiah 65:17; Revelation 21:1), this will be primarily for the sake of the "new Jerusalem" where all human suffering, pain, and misery will be overcome (Isaiah 65:18–24; Revelation 21:2–4). The rest of creation, though always recognized and sometimes acknowledged and reflected upon, simply was not of central *theological* interest or importance, and (with the exception of the angels) never became the subject of any technical theological vocabulary or doctrines.

In modernity (and in so-called postmodernity as well) nature and God have become rivals in the claims they make on our interest, attention, commitment, and loyalty. With Giordano Bruno and others, nature began to be thought of as itself infinite, and a direct conflict began to emerge with the concept of (the infinite) God—and with God's unique metaphysical and religious roles. In due course, God and nature were explicitly identified with each other (by Spinoza and others); and it was under the aegis of the concept of nature (that is, of natural process) that Spinoza made this identification, not the concept of God (i.e., the concept of free moral agency). Nature was displacing God as the all-encompassing reality.

Thinking of the reality with which we humans have to do largely in ecological terms—that is, in terms of the interconnected and interdependent powers and processes of nature instead of in more traditional religious terms such as God our "heavenly Father" whose children we are, or the "Lord" of the universe whose loyal subjects we seek to be—leads to sharply different understandings of who or what we humans are and how we ought to live. To the extent that we today take our experience of natural powers and processes as paradigmatic in our understanding of reality—rather than the distinctively human activities and experiences of choosing, setting purposes, willing, thinking, creating, speaking, making covenants, and the like, which provided principal models for constructing the traditional symbol "God"—we are led to think of the world in which we live, and our human place within it, in terms quite different from those presented by our Western religious traditions. (In some other religious traditions it may be easier to make connections with modern quasi-scientific ideas of nature than it is in the basically theistic Abrahamic traditions.)

To sum up this part: the traditional Christian understanding of humanity in relation to God, with its powerfully anthropomorphic God-image, tends to obscure and dilute, in Christian faith and theology, ecological ways of thinking about our human place in the world. We Christians need to ask ourselves: Is it necessary today to develop an understanding of God and humanity that overcomes these difficulties? Can the symbols *God*, *world*, and *humanity*, and their relationship to each other, be constructed in a way that enables them to highlight our ecological embeddedness in the natural order rather than obscure it and thus help to orient us, in our living and our actions, in ways directly appropriate to our place in that order? Is a new symbolic pattern of this sort the underlying structure in terms of which Christian faith must come to understand itself if it is to guide us effectively in today's ecological world? I certainly cannot predict the future directions in which Christian faith will move in its self-understanding, but I can present a reconstruction of these Christian symbols that is coherent with our present evolutionary conceptions of the appearance and development of life on Earth, and of human existence within the

ecology of life. To a brief outline of that option for Christian faith I now turn.

I need to introduce three concepts that, taken together, will help us conceive of God, humanity, and their relationship to each other in a way different from that found in traditional Christian thinking, a way that will facilitate our developing an ecological ethic. First, I want to spell out briefly what I call a *biohistorical* understanding of human existence (to replace the more traditional body/soul, image-of-God understanding). This way of conceiving the human emphasizes our deep embeddedness in the web of life on planet Earth while simultaneously attending to the significance of our radical distinctiveness as a form of life. Second, I want to call attention to what can be designated as the *serendipitous creativity* manifest throughout the universe—that is, the coming into being through time of the new and the novel. I use the concept of creativity here rather than the traditional idea of "God the creator" because it presents creation of the new as ongoing processes or events and does not call forth an image of a kind of "cosmic person" standing outside the world, manipulating it from without. Third, because the traditional idea of God's purposive activity—a powerful teleological movement working in and through all cosmic and historical processes—is almost impossible to reconcile with current thinking about evolution and history, I propose to replace it with the more modest conception of what I call directional movements, or *trajectories,* that emerge spontaneously in the course of evolutionary and historical developments. This more open (even random) notion of serendipitous creativity manifesting itself in evolutionary and historical trajectories of various sorts fits in with but significantly amplifies today's scientific thinking about cosmic, biological, and historico-cultural processes.

We turn, then, to the notion of humans as biohistorical beings. Given the basic evolutionary account of the origins of human life, let us look briefly at certain features of the later stages of the process through which humankind, as we twenty-first-century university-educated people understand it, actually emerged. It is important to note that human *historical* development, over many millennia, has been as indispensable to the creation of what we humans are today as were the biological evolutionary developments that preceded our appearance on planet Earth. Our human biological nature has itself been shaped and informed in important respects by certain historical developments. Brain scientist Terrence Deacon has recently argued, for example, that it was the growth of *symbolic* behaviors—language—(a central feature of the historical development of human enculturedness) that brought about the evolution of our unusually large brains. The order of human history, with its development of highly complex cultures, its diverse modes of social organization, and its exceedingly flexible and complex languages and behaviors, is the only context (as

far as we know) within which beings with self-consciousness, with great imaginative powers and creativity, with significant freedom and responsible agency, have appeared. All the way down to the deepest layers of our distinctively human existence, thus, we are not simply biological beings, animals; we are biohistorical beings.

These developments have transformed our relationship to the nature within which we emerged. As one rather obvious example of this point, consider the impact of the historical growth, over thousands of generations, of human awareness and knowledge of the natural world. In the cultures of modernity human knowledges have become increasingly comprehensive, detailed, and technologized, providing us with considerable control over the physical and biological (as well as sociocultural and psychological) conditions of our existence. We human beings, and the further course of our history, are no longer completely at the disposal of the natural order and natural powers that brought us into being, in the way we were as recently as ten millennia ago. Through our various symbolisms and knowledges, skills and technologies, we have gained a kind of transcendence over the nature of which we are part unequaled (so far as we know) by any other form of life. And in consequence (for good or ill) we have utterly transformed the face of the earth and are beginning to push on into space; and we are becoming capable of altering the actual genetic makeup of future human generations. It is *qua* our development into beings shaped in many respects by historico-cultural processes like these—that is, humanly created, not merely natural biological processes—that beings with historicity, we humans, have gained these increasing measures of control over the natural order as well as over the onward movement of history.

Despite the great powers that our knowledges and technologies have given us, we are aware today that our transcendence of the natural orders within which we have emerged is far from adequate to assure our ongoing human existence; indeed, the ecological crisis of our time has brought to our attention the fact that precisely through the exercise of our growing power on planet Earth we have been destroying the very conditions that make life possible. Paradoxically, thus, our understanding of ourselves and of the world in which we live, and our growing power over many of the circumstances on this planet that have seemed to us undesirable, may in the end lead to our self-destruction.

I turn now to the other two concepts I mentioned. I suggested that we think of the cosmos not as a kind of permanent structure but rather as constituted by (a) ongoing cosmic serendipitous creativity which (b) manifests itself through trajectories of various sorts working themselves out in longer and shorter stretches of time. There are, of course, many cosmic trajectories, moving in quite different directions, and here on Earth there have been many quite diverse evolutionary trajectories producing the bil-

lions of species of life. Let us consider for a moment the trajectory that eventuated in the spread and development of human life all over the globe, the trajectory that issued in the creation of beings with historicity. Our human existence—its purposiveness, its greatly varied complexes of social/moral/cultural/religious values and meanings, its virtually unlimited imaginative powers and glorious creativity, its horrible failures and gross evils, its historicity—all this has come into being on this trajectory, this manifestation of the serendipitous creativity in the cosmos that has given us humans our existence.[2] We do not know what direction this evolutionary-historical trajectory will move in the future—perhaps toward the opening of ever new possibilities for human beings, as we increasingly take responsibility for our lives and our future; perhaps going beyond humanity and historicity altogether, however difficult it is to image how that should be understood; perhaps coming to an end in the total destruction of human existence.

The picture I am painting here deeply enhances the *mystery* dimension of our God-talk, first, by employing the metaphor of creativity (instead of creator), thus dissolving away the specific concreteness of the traditional idea of the divine through ceasing to reify the person-agent metaphors of traditional Christian thinking; and second, by presenting a picture of a quite open and indeterminate future, in place of the expectation of God's providential ordering of all history toward an eschatological fulfillment of our human-centered hopes. This emphasis on the mystery of creativity not only brings us into closer relation with modern evolutionary thinking; it has the further advantage of facilitating conversation between Christian theologians and adherents of certain East Asian religious traditions. The Buddhist metaphor of *sunyata* (emptiness, nothingness), for example, seems to carry some motifs similar to the idea of creativity. Confucian thinking about "Heaven" and Taoist ideas of chaos seem also to be related in certain respects. Thus, replacing the reified metaphor of God as creator with creativity (in our theological reflection) may help prepare for more fruitful conversations with, and even collaborative thinking with, representatives of these East Asian traditions.[3] And that in turn may help us develop a truly global ethic.

Construing the universe in this way, as constituted by cosmic serendipitous creativity that manifests itself in trajectories of various sorts, is of especial value to us humans, because it can help us discern our proper place within the evolutionary-ecological trajectory that is our home. I want to note five points in this connection.

First, this approach provides us with a frame within which we can characterize quite accurately, and can unify into an overall vision, what seems actually to have happened, so far as we know, in the course of cosmic evolution and history. The ancient cosmological dualisms—heaven and earth, God and the world, supernature and nature—that have shaped

Western religious faiths and thinking from early on and have become so problematical in our own time are completely gone in this picture.

Second, this approach gives a significant, but not dominant, place and meaning to the distinctive biohistorical character of human life within the cosmic process, and as a result the traditional anthropological dualisms—body and soul (or spirit), mind and matter, those beings that bear the "image of God" and those that do not—also fall away in this picture. Moreover, this means, happily, that the ground for elevating the distinction between male and female into an ontological and axiological gender dualism is also undercut here. It is important for us to note that the ecological niche that is our home can be properly defined and described only by specifying carefully not only the physical and biological features required for human life to go on but the importance of certain historical features as well. For example, only in sociocultural contexts in which some measure of justice, freedom, order, and mutual respect sufficiently prevail, and in which distribution of the goods of life (food, shelter, health, education, economic opportunity, and so on) is sufficiently equitable, can children in each new generation be expected to have a reasonable chance of maturing into responsible and productive women and men—women and men, that is to say, who can take the sort of responsibility for their society and for the planet that is now required of human beings worldwide.

Third, awareness of these sorts of distinctive biohistorical features of ourselves and our ecological niche makes possible patterns of thinking that can assist communities (and individuals) to understand better and assess more fully both the adequacy of the varied biohistorical contexts in which we humans today live and the import of the diverse sociocultural developments through which the various segments of humanity are moving, in this way enabling us to take up more responsible roles within these contexts and developments. Thus, *normative* thinking—the development of an ethic—directly appropriate to our varied human situations in the ecology of planet Earth is facilitated by this biohistorical understanding; and the all too human-centered morality and ethics, politics and economics, of our traditions can be more effectively called into question and significantly transformed.

Fourth, because this approach highlights the linkage of serendipitous cosmic creativity with our humanness and the humane values important to us as well as with our ecological niche, it can support hope (but not certainty) for the future of humanity. It is a hope about the overall direction of future human history—hope for truly *creative* movement toward ecologically and morally responsible, pluralistic human existence.

Fifth, a hope of this sort, grounded on the mystery of creativity in the world—a creativity that, on our trajectory, evidences itself in part through our own creative powers—can help motivate us to devote our lives to bringing about this more humane and ecologically rightly-ordered world to which

we aspire. If God is understood as the creativity manifest throughout the cosmos, and humans are understood as deeply embedded in and basically sustained by the web of life on planet Earth, we will be strongly encouraged to develop attitudes and to participate in activities that fit properly into this web of living creativity. Thus, we will be led to live in response to, and in so doing will contribute to, the ongoing creative development of our trajectory—God's activity among us humans—within this web.

This theological frame of orientation or vision of reality, grounded in significant respects on today's scientific world-picture, is not, of course, in any way forced upon us; it can be appropriated only by means of our own personal and collective decisions, our own acts of faith in face of the ultimate mystery of life and the world. We are being drawn beyond our present human condition and order of life by creative impulses in our biohistorical trajectory suggesting decisions and movements now required of us. If we respond in appropriately creative ways to the historical and ecological forces now impinging upon us on all sides, there is a possibility—though no certainty—that niches for humankind better fitted to the wider ecological and historical orders on Earth than our present niches may be brought into being. However, if we fail to so respond, it seems likely that humans may not survive much longer. Are we willing to commit ourselves to live and act in accord with the imperatives laid on us by the biohistorical situations in which we find ourselves, in the hope that our actions will be supported and enhanced by cosmic serendipitously creative events? In my view it is this kind of hope, faith, and commitment to which the trajectory that has brought us into being now calls us.

Thinking of God in the way I suggest here will evoke a significantly different faith and hope and piety than that associated with the Christian symbol-system as traditionally interpreted. However, certain central Christian emphases are significantly deepened. First and most important, understanding the ultimate mystery of things, God, in terms of the metaphor of serendipitous creativity—instead of in terms of the essentially anthropomorphic creator/lord/father metaphors of the tradition—facilitates, more effectively than the traditional imagery did, the maintaining of a *decisive qualitative distinction* (though not an ontological separation) between God and the created order. The creativity manifest in the world thus becomes the only appropriate focus for human devotion and worship, that which alone can provide proper overall orientation for human life. All other realities—being creatures and being finite, transitory, and corruptible—become dangerous idols when worshipped and made the central focus of human orientation, and can bring disaster into human affairs. This important distinction between God (creativity) and the created order—perhaps the most significant contribution of monotheistic religious traditions to human self-understanding—continues to be emphasized in the symbolic picture I am sketching here; but it is understood in a way that may

facilitate, more effectively than our traditional forms of God-talk, fruitful connections with other religious traditions.

Second, conceiving humans as biohistorical beings who have emerged on one of the countless creative trajectories moving through the cosmos—instead of as the climax of all creation, distinguished from all other creatures as the very image of God—makes it clear that human beings are indissolubly a part of the created order. In this picture the too-easy human-centeredness (and Christian-centeredness) of traditional Christian thinking is thoroughly undercut.

This understanding of God, a form of *radical monotheism*, to use H. R. Niebuhr's term (1960), can be developed into a full-orbed Christian interpretation of human faith and life, if the creativity that is God is brought into significant connection with the poignancy and power of the story and character of Jesus;[4] and at the same time it opens the door to appreciative dialogue with other religious standpoints. I therefore propose this reconstruction of the conceptions of God, humanity, and the world as providing a way for Christian faith—and perhaps some other faiths as well—to reconstitute themselves in light of our contemporary evolutionary/ecological sensibility and knowledge.[5]

This reconstruction of the theological structure underlying most Christian faith and its moral and other expressions not only connects Christian faith and action with modern scientific thinking about our world and our place in it. In addition, because of the new metaphors in which it is formulated, and through its undercutting of traditional Christian claims to superiority over other religious and moral standpoints, it opens us to free and creative discussions with representatives of other religious and ethical traditions about today's major human problems. Thus, it encourages us to move toward cooperative action in addressing our common concerns. At the same time, however, it brings into view another major problem that our attempts to develop a global orientation for humankind, and a global ethic responsive to ecological issues, must address.

The moves I have proposed rest on my attempt to bring specifically Christian thinking into closer relationship with modern scientific evolutionary and ecological thinking—the thinking that for many of us in the West has raised our consciousness about ecological matters. But we cannot assume that all—or even most—people around the world (or in North America, for that matter) take the sciences seriously enough to think about ecological issues and today's ecological crisis in this quasi-scientific way. In dialogues with East Asian Buddhists—including modernized Buddhists—on ecological questions, it became quite clear to me that my assumption about the authority of the sciences (biology, cosmology, geology, meteorology, astrophysics, and the like) on these matters was not central to their thinking at all; these Buddhists, like most Christians, simply framed their

understanding of ecological issues in terms of their traditional concepts, without much reference to scientific matters. I have argued here that traditional *Christian* concepts are structurally in tension with ecological thinking, and it is likely that such problems will also arise with other traditional religious frameworks if they are similarly probed and scrutinized.

Most educated Westerners simply believe what leaders in these scientific disciplines have been saying about the deterioration of the environment, especially in recent decades, and about the human input into and thus responsibility for that deterioration. In so doing we take for granted much of the modern evolutionary picture of the cosmos and the development of life on Earth, a picture in which time's arrow is taken to move forever forward, never again to return to previous evolutionary or historical stages. This characteristically Western way of seeing the cosmic environment in which human life transpires—an essentially developmental picture of the whole created order, rooted in ancient Israel's thinking about God's relation to the world—has been taken over (though without its earlier teleological features) in the cosmological reflection of the modern sciences with their theories about the origins and evolution of life. Practically no attention was given by my Asian Buddhist colleagues to this developmental scientific presupposition underlying most modern Western thinking about ecology; they worked almost completely in terms of a traditional Eastern cyclical picture of the cosmic order within which life appears. But the very notion of an ecological *crisis* which *humans* have brought about, a crisis affecting all life on Earth and which may ultimately bring the human project to an end forever, clearly presupposes an understanding of time as always moving forward.

We Christians, as well as others influenced deeply by the Abrahamic traditions, are able to take these notions of directional temporality largely for granted when we attempt to rethink our faith in more modern terms and when we seek to construct a global ecological ethic. This makes it possible (as I argued earlier) to integrate major Christian ideas with modern scientific thinking. It is not at all clear to me, however, how this evolutionary-developmental view of time can be similarly integrated with religions that think largely in terms of nature's eternal rhythms. To what extent does the very idea of a global ecological ethic depend on modern scientific thinking, and thus on basic cosmological and theological assumptions quite foreign to most Eastern religions? In working toward such an ethic are we expecting the other religious traditions with which we are interacting simply to buy into our evolutionary/historical/developmental way of thinking? Or do we think there is some way of transcending this ancient divide between East and West, or some way of formulating this ethic, without presupposing any modern cosmological or biological ideas at all? I do not know the answers to these questions, but I think that to ignore them would be to move forward with one more Western imperial

and colonial scheme and would justifiably be strongly resisted by many non-Western peoples.

It is obvious, I presume, that my proposals here are most clearly directed to Christians, and that even for them the transformation of faith envisioned is not likely to be accepted easily or soon. Do we expect representatives of other religious traditions to undertake similar modernizing transformations of their traditional modes of thought in light of the ecological crisis and the scientific thinking that has brought it to our attention? Have we any right to expect such a thing? We need to think seriously about these questions as we consider the possibility of creating a truly global ethic. Though it is clear that human beings do make changes in the faith structures out of which they live—think of the phenomenon of religious conversion—and that such changes are always going on in times like our own, it is probably only rarely that such changes are brought about simply by deliberate decision, for these matters lie deep in our selfhood and in our religious and cultural value-and-meaning commitments and practices. However, those who find themselves profoundly dissatisfied with their basic stance in life and the world often discover ways to make some deliberate moves toward alternative postures. People can, for example, decide to move permanently into a culture or religion significantly different from the one in which they were originally socialized, fully aware that this will change their world, their life, their values and meanings, in decisive and unforeseeable ways; each of us can deliberately make vocational decisions that we know will drastically change our whole way of life and the values and meanings that had informed our life up to now; and so on. Changes of different sorts and degrees can in fact be made in our ways of living, our value commitments, our meaning-understandings, our basic faith-stances—by individuals and also by communities—if attractive options become available. Is this what we are asking of our non-Western colleagues?

In my theological work I have tried to make visible such an option for Christian orientations in life and the world. Many Christians today, formed to deep levels by traditional understandings of the basic Christian symbols, will find this option unsatisfactory and will pass it by. This does not surprise me: I am well aware how drastic is the change in faith's self-understanding that is being proposed, and I have no desire to push people in directions they do not want to go in matters of this sort. There are some, however (I have reason to believe), who may find this way of thinking about Christian faith and life to be liberative, indeed salvific. And some radically transformative proposals also seem to be appearing in some other religious traditions. Instead of continuing to despair about reconciling our deep religious commitments with our sensibilities and understandings of human existence in today's world, suggestions like the ones I have pre-

sented may prove helpful as we work our way through to a compelling and challenging version of faith for today.

As we all know, there are many understandings of religious faith alive in our world. This pluralism is a good thing, for there are many different sorts of humans and many different sorts of needs to which religious faiths must minister. It is not evident, however, that a thoroughly unconstrained pluralism on *ecological* issues would be a good thing, either for human existence today or for the rest of life on this planet. For those facing the problems that the ecological crisis poses for religious faiths, I offer my proposals as an option to ponder. I hope they will be of help, as all of us increasingly find ourselves forced to adapt our living to the evolutionary/ecological world in which we today find ourselves.

Notes

1. Much of the material in the following paragraphs was drawn from Kaufman 2000.
2. A great deal more, of course, needs to be said about this concept of serendipitous creativity. For my most recent reflection on these matters, see Kaufman 2001a.
3. Elsewhere I have explored the possibility of thinking of the Christian God in terms of the Buddhist metaphor of "emptiness" (instead of the traditional idea of "being") and suggested that this sort of move would make easier connections between some central christological themes and certain forms of Buddhist thinking. See Kaufman 1996b.
4. In a recent article I discussed in much more detail the way in which a christocentric theism can be developed in connection with this overall theological program; see Kaufman 2001c. See also Kaufman 1993, especially chaps. 25–27, and Kaufman 1996a, especially chaps. 7 and 9. In these latter two books I sketch a "wider christology" not exclusively focused on the man Jesus.
5. A more fully elaborated version of the position briefly sketched here can be found in Kaufman 2000. That article and the present essay are both based on the theological position developed in Kaufman 1993.

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