

"God is One, and likes unity." (Hadith, Islam)

ECOLOGICAL ECUMENISM

by Jay Newbern

Our planet is in a state of emergency.

The threat is quite genuine and is causing spiritual transformation. Ringing alarm bells on Spaceship Earth are not just sounding in our dreams. Massive denial cannot silence them. As the Third Millennium dawns, we have received our wake-up call. Stewardship! the klaxon announces with increasing urgency.

The Great Turning is how Buddhist scholar Joanna Macy describes the vast planetary revolution that is now underway because our way of life cannot be sustained. (1) Destruction caused by the Industrial Growth Society (corporate globalization) extracts finite resources beyond Urantia's capacity to renew, and spews out wastes faster than Earth's capacity to absorb. Even the globe-spanning oceans and seas of our water planet are being poisoned. Transnational corporations ("persons" according to U.S. Supreme Court) plunder our common heritage at will for just profit alone. A few plutocrats (ruling monied elite) get richer and richer but most humans sink below the poverty line. What does it profit a corporation to win the whole world but lose its existence as the planet dies? (Souls belong only to actual, real persons.)

The world's southernmost continent of Antarctica is the canary in the planetary mine shaft. It was over the South Pole that the British discovered a hole in the ozone layer that continues to expand as humans continue to flush chemicals into the atmosphere, wiping out nature's

protective filter that shields us from the sun's harmful radiation. And global warming has now caused Antarctica's ice shelf to calve another break-off ice berg, this one three times the size of Rhode Island. Man has fouled his own nest. He has polluted the well upon which he depends. Human beings rabid with greed have ravaged and despoiled God's magnificent creation on this sphere. During our lifetimes, more of the world's resources have been consumed than in all of the rest of human history before we were born. And now E-commerce on the Internet is accelerating this devouring rate of consumption, making it even worse.

The Great Turning now going on is our search for authenticity, a reawakening to the sacredness of life itself, a taking of responsibility for our spiritual lives, and a reconnection with sacredness in order to embody it ourselves. Macy reports that the Turning is happening in every spiritual tradition - Jewish Renewal movement, Creation Spirituality, women's spirituality, resurgence of Wicca, teachings of ancient indigenous peoples. There are also charismatic Catholics, gay spirituality, Jews for Jesus, Urantians, and many others. The consciousness pendulum is swinging from transcendence (out there) to immanence (in here). Numerous mortals are rapidly realizing that two of the most important words in the English language are "within" and "now."

In December 1999, just before all four digits on the calendar changed, two different planetary events occurred which signaled heightened awareness of the need for unity among Urantia's eleven major religions. The first happened during the initial week of the month: the Parliament of World Religions meeting in Cape Town, South Africa. The second indicator of new ecumenism of the worldwide interfaith movement occurred around New Year's Eve before 2000: the 72 Hour Project coordinated by

United Religions International (URI); it was Urantia-wide.

Two significant global events involving the hopeful unification of contending religions - and they took place within three weeks of each other just before the celebration of a new year/decade/century/millennium. It does not matter that the 21st Century and Third Millennium will not arrive until 2001 (no zero year between BC and AD since Arabs would not discover "0" until 6th Century). Perception and willingness to try to come together on our common lifeboat are what is important.

Only a half-dozen years separated the latest Parliament of World Religions from the previous one held in Chicago in 1993. Before that the hiatus was 100-years-long: 1893. Acceleration applies even to spiritual conclaves. The Chicago Parliament in '93 was vociferous in condemning "economic disparities that threaten so many families with ruin." It also strongly blasted religion-based violence: "Religion is often misused for purely power - political goals, including war. We are filled with disgust." (2) This conference went on to endorse an inspiring, life-affirming ethic.

More than 7,000 religionists from 80 nations assembled in Cape Town in '99 to issue a softer proclamation. This Parliament called upon the world's social and cultural institutions to redefine their roles for the new century. Organizations and individuals were asked to offer gifts of service to the planet, from reconciling a troubled community or family to engaging in personal prayer and meditation.

The second flagship event just before the "great turning" of the calendar was known as the 72 Hour Project. Coordinated by United Religions International utilizing high-tech communications, the Project empowered one million participants to march, sing and pray in 160 separate, locally

organized events. In Pakistan a peace caravan pleading for interreligious understanding traveled across the entire country and was witnessed by hundreds of thousands. At San Quentin Prison north of San Francisco inmates on Death Row prayed for peace in 90-minute shifts for three days.

New Year's Eve before AD 2000 was quite special indeed. The incredibly spectacular light show at the Eiffel Tower in Paris may have been a truly seminal signal from the City of Light. Virtually the entire weary world witnessed it on television. As the fireworks erupted and dazzled above Paris, people were praying in prison, marching in Pakistan, and singing/chanting around our blue-white sphere. In Rio de Janeiro our Brazilian siblings raised their hands to the heavens, in Korea (with its own translated Urantia Book) the various denominations gathered to pray for reunification of North and South, and in Ethiopia an African peace pole was dedicated by Orthodox, Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant leaders. God only knows the entire outpouring of spiritual awareness.

That which even we know is this: religion is a universal trait found throughout humanity, and the one commonality which all mortals share is God's inner spirit that resides within all normal persons. Accepting this species-wide familiarity provides a universal foundation upon which to focus on human commonalities rather than differences. Surely the spirit of unity leads in this direction. The differences which have divided us in the past are really no more than uniqueness, that wonderful diversity which God has designed in his creativity.

If one merges the O of Occident (West) with the O of Orient (East) into the O of Omni (All) - Omnipotence, Omniscience, Omnipresence - then one realizes three related O's, or three concentric circles - the symbol of our universe. Then the Brotherhood of Man will have reached nexus

with the Fatherhood of God.

Mutual respect and common acceptance among the various religions must begin with the world's three great monotheistic faiths because they already agree on so much. Judaism, Christianity and Islam realize there is only one God; mere semantics separate them. Jews know him as Adonai Elohim (Yahweh), Christians call him Father (Universal), and Muslims refer to God as Allah. These three religions all revere Abraham as an ancient (4,000 years ago) spiritual titan. They generally do not appreciate that he received his enlightenment on monotheism from Melchizedek, God's third epochal revelation. Melchizedek missionaries then spread this truth throughout most of the world.

A second similarity the three faiths share is that each claims a holy book as its foundation. For Jews the sacred Scripture is the Torah, for Christians it is the Bible, and for Muslims the Qur'an (Koran). And for revelational Jesusonians, of course, it is The Urantia Book.

All planetary religions form a mosaic like a stained glass window, glowing with every color in the light spectrum. There are many colors but only one sun that illuminates them. Each contains truth. These differing doorways to God are like blind men describing an elephant via partial touch. But basically they all share this: the Golden Rule rests at the spiritual heart of each one. Virtually all religionists know that we are called to love others as we love ourselves and to treat others as we would have them treat us. Gold is the common color among those who quest.

Greater than any of these similarities, however, is the unifying Spirit of Truth from the Godman of Urantia. Even Newsweek has reported on the bridges connecting the three monotheistic faiths:

"There are, of course, important commonalities among these three religious traditions. All three believe in one God who has revealed his will through sacred Scriptures. They all look to an endtime when God's justice and power will triumph. And they all recognize the figure of Abraham as a father in faith. What is often overlooked, however, is another figure common to the three traditions: Jesus of Nazareth." (3)

To Christians the human/divine Jesus is the only Son of God. To Muslims our Christ is a prophet and messenger of Allah. To Jews Joshua ben Joseph was a teacher and reformer - "one of us." Even Buddhism, which is actually a philosophy with no God, accepts Jesus; the Dalai Lama recognizes Christ as a figure of great compassion, much like the Buddha. To other Buddhists Jesus is a bodhisattva, a perfectly enlightened being who vows to help others.

Pope John Paul II, his leading advocate, has said this about Jesus: "Christ is absolutely original and absolutely unique. If He were only a wise man like Socrates, if He were a prophet like Muhammad, if He were enlightened like the Buddha, without doubt He would not be what He is." (4)

Of all the world's religions, Islam - the most recent - is most closely allied with Christianity as concerns Jesus. Not only do Muslims believe in his alleged virgin birth but they also honor his mother Mary in a singular way. In Islam Christ is known as Isa ibn Maryam (Jesus son of Mary); she is the only woman mentioned in the Qur'an.

"...the Muslim Jesus enjoys unique spiritual prerogatives that other prophets, including Muhammad, lack. Only Jesus and his mother were born untouched by Satan. Even Muhammad had to be purified by angels before receiving prophethood. Again, in the Qur'an Muhammad is not

presented as a miracle worker, but Jesus miraculously heals the blind, cures lepers, and 'brings forth the dead by (Allah's) leave.' In this way Jesus manifests himself as the Messiah, or 'the anointed one.'" (5)

Hinduism, the planet's oldest religion, shares with Christianity the concept of a trinity. Many Hindus are drawn to Jesus because of his compassion and his devotion to nonviolence. Their legend has Christ journeying across Asia as a teenager and learning yogic meditation; he then returned home to become a guru or teacher to the Jews. The Urantia Book reveals that Jesus traveled nearly to India as a young man.

Also in Asia was the religious leader most often compared to Jesus - Gautama Siddhartha who became the Buddha. Although Christ is really incomparable, he did share many analogous parallels with the founder of Buddhism. Both were allegedly born to virgins, both left home for the wilderness where they were tempted by a devil figure, and both returned enlightened to challenge their respective religious establishments with their teachings. Both Jesus and Buddha attracted disciples and were betrayed by one. They each preached compassion, unselfishness and altruism. And both created movements that bear the founder's name. So again we observe the commonalities among religions.

The basic instinct of survival is also common among humans, and cultural historian Thomas Berry addresses that characteristic in his The Great Work: Our Way into the Future. He labels our present time of greenhouse effect and nuclear menace as the Ecozoic Era, where corporate pollution threatens habitability of the planet. Berry reports that we are now in a moment of grace with a window of opportunity to change. Entire civilizations and cultures are threatened, as well as ecological systems.

"So severe and so irreversible is this deterioration that we might well believe those who tell us that we have only a brief period in which to reverse the devastation that is settling over the Earth. Only recently has the deep pathos of the (planetary) situation begun to sink into our consciousness." (6)

In addition to ozone depletion and melting polar ice caps which will raise sea levels, we are facing deforestation of the rain forests, desertification, collapse of ocean fisheries, plummeting water tables, nuclear waste storage, acid rain, and the greatest mass extinction of animals since the dinosaurs. But as grim as all that is, Berry leaves us with reason to hope.

"...Even as we make our transition into this new century we must note that moments of grace are transient moments. The transformation must take place within a brief period. Otherwise it is gone forever. In the immense story of the universe, that so many of these dangerous moments have been navigated successfully is some indication that the universe is for us rather than against us. We need only summon these forces to our support in order to succeed. Although the human challenges to these purposes must never be underestimated, it is difficult to believe that the purposes of the universe or of the planet Earth will ultimately be thwarted." (7)

That which appears impossible to mortals is, of course, possible with God. He sends his Word of Truth to us to encourage us in our great struggle. Just two examples follow, one from divine revelation, the other from Islamic sacred scripture:

"The religions of pessimistic despair seek to obtain release from the burdens of life; they crave extinction in endless slumber and rest.

These are the religions of primitive fear and dread. The religion of Jesus is a new gospel of faith to be proclaimed to struggling humanity. This new religion is founded on faith, hope, and love."

--- The Urantia Book, pp. 2062-63

"Take firm hold, all of you, on the rope of God. Do not break up into divisions. Be mindful of the grace of God to you, how you were formerly enemies, and He united your hearts in mutual bonds, so that by His grace, you became brothers."

--- Qur'an 3:103

Amen. (So be it)

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San Francisco
May 2000

END NOTES

- (1) "The Great Turning" by Sarah Ruth van Gelder
YES! A Journal of Positive Futures
Spring 2000, pp. 34-37
- (2) "Speaking Peace" by Carol Estes
YES! Page 6
- (3) "Visions of Jesus: How Jews, Muslims and Buddhists View Him"
Newsweek, March 27, 2000; page 51
- (4) Ibid
- (5) Newsweek, page 56
- (6) "Moments of Grace" by Thomas Berry
YES! Page 15
- (7) Ibid, Page 16

RESOURCES

YES! A Journal of Positive Futures

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THE GREAT WORK: OUR WAY INTO THE FUTURE

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Bell Tower, NY, 1999

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