

A Common Earth Religion: World Religions from an Ecological Perspective

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Is globalization making modern world religions out of local beliefs? What changes are required of the world religions in the light of the new ecological perspective on the earth?

In this article, I will begin by critically taking stock of a globalization that takes no care of the globe, and modern world religions that have no thought for “the world”. I will then explain how the earth sustains the life of every religion on it. My question is this: Do we need an “earth religion” as the overarching framework in which world religions can encounter one another and live side by side in harmony?

World Religions in the Age of Globalization

The global village

Globalization makes itself felt in every area of life. Since much has already been written about this topic, I will limit myself to a brief description of current trends.

Through the image of the global village, we can see that because of modern means of communication and transport, we are all neighbours, as in a traditional village. Communication creates communion, with no regard for traditional boundaries and distances. Telephones, fax machines, the Internet, e-mail and so on enable us to communicate with each other with almost no delay at all. Individuals in different nations can be close as never before. Air travel bridges vast distances. We are beginning to share one space; time delays are vanishing; physical distance is shrinking: interdependencies are growing. Our lives are more and more tightly intertwined. Events in Europe have consequences in Africa; changes in China affect us all; the collapse of the US real estate market brought the finances of many nations to their knees. The different peoples of the world are merging into one humanity. Different cultural traditions are melding together. The economy is globalizing markets and production systems. Wealth and poverty are being globalized by the banks. Just as in a traditional village, we are all related, and we all share in the sorrows and joys of our common life.

¹ This article is a translation of “Eine gemeinsame Religion der Erde: Weltreligionen in ökologischer Perspektive”, in *Ökumenische Rundschau*, Vol. 60, No. 1, 2011. Translated by the WCC Language Service.

There is one partner in this process that has not yet had its say, for almost nobody listens to its voice. That is the earth, our common home and the source of all life. We globalize our civilization with no concern for the strengths and weaknesses of the globe itself. We globalize our human economy at the expense of the earth's resources. We call this "progress", but our climb up the ladder of progress pushes down other life forms on this earth and threatens the fragile conditions for life itself. Every year, thousands of species become extinct; the climate deteriorates; the deserts expand; the sea level rises. We all know *The Limits to Growth* – the 1972 study by the Club of Rome – but we pay those limits barely any attention.²

There follows an outline of other political and economic developments, after which I will draw out what this all means for the world religions.

From world politics to earth politics

I see this approach developing in three stages:

- a) Until the Second World War, the peoples of the world were politically organized in *nation states*. When faced with global challenges, such as the nuclear threat, those nations responded with international treaties. They founded the United Nations, yet no nation would relinquish any of its sovereignty to the Security Council. No transnational institutions were created. Responsibility for finding political solutions to mutual threats lay – and still lies – in the realms of national foreign policy.
- b) However, the greater the universal dangers become, the less chance any individual nation has of ensuring peace and protecting life. This is why some 30 years ago, at the height of the Cold War, German physicist and philosopher Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker demanded a paradigm shift from national foreign policy to world domestic policy,³ repositioning the focus of political thought away from the vital interests of the individual nation towards the survival interest of humanity as a whole in this, the only world we have.

Every nation must subordinate its own interests to those of humanity. Conflicts between nations must never be allowed to menace the continued existence of the human race. Ideological and religious claims to absolute truth must be relativized for the sake of the future of humankind.

- c) The next step that must be taken is the transition from such a world domestic policy to a common earth policy.⁴ Ecological disasters do not stop at national borders; they threaten every nation. The death toll of tsunamis and earthquakes, famines and floods has evoked admirable human solidarity. However, at an international level, a large-scale strategy to face the ecological disasters of the future remains virtually impossible, because there are still so many conflicting national interests: a common earth policy needs transnational institutions.

² Donella H. Meadows, Jorgen Randers, Dennis L. Meadows and William H. Behrens, *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind*, Universe, New York, 1972.

³ Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, *Die Bedingungen des Friedens* (The conditions for peace), Vandenhoeck + Ruprecht, Frankfurt, 1963, pp. 9, 11.

⁴ Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker, *Erdpolitik. Ökologische Realpolitik an der Schwelle zum Jahrhundert der Umwelt* (Earth policy. Ecological Realpolitik at the dawn of the century of the environment), Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, 1991; *Factor Four: Doubling Wealth, Halving Resource Use*, Earthscan Ltd., London, 1998.

For a transnational peace policy, a firm foundation can be found in human rights. For the earth policy that is needed, we must codify and enforce the rights of the earth itself, “regardless of its worth to human beings”, as is written in the UN Earth Charter. This view must also apply to other forms of life in nature. They must be protected for their own sake.

From a world economy to an earth economy

- a) The 19th century saw the development, along with the nation state, of the national economy, or macroeconomics. The most important thing for a national economy is the regulated domestic market. External trade was termed the import-export business. It was promoted and regulated at first by international trade agreements. In many parts of the world, this remains the case. But the globalization of markets and production systems has given rise to transnational companies. Since they were deregulated about 30 years ago (by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher), we have seen the emergence of transnational markets and transnational economic organizations. These global players in the world economy seem to have shaken off all political regulation; indeed, they seem to be beginning to regulate national policy themselves.
- b) While national economies merge into one world economy, political institutions have not kept pace. This imbalance can be seen with painful clarity when populations must pay the price for damage done by transnational companies – from the oil industry to nuclear power. Through governments and non-governmental organizations, we must put pressure on the world economy to become an earth economy – one that pays for the harm it does and learns to take care of the natural world.
- c) To destroy one’s own livelihood or that of another people for short-term gain is stupid. The earth’s resources, too, are limited and will one day be exhausted. There is no need to go into details here; we all know this. However, my point is different: obviously, the measure of progress and globalization is economic growth – quantitative growth on a linear time axis. Produce more; consume more. On this time axis, we move towards the future and leave the past behind. In economic terms, this means that consumption increases; we use more and more resources and leave more and more refuse behind us. Yet to transition towards an earth economy means to learn the earth’s cyclical time, where strength can be reborn. To convert this earth wisdom into an earth economy will entail developing renewable energies and expanding the recycling industry, making new from old.⁵ This approach will bring us into a qualitative kind of growth and stabilize our relationship with the natural world through balanced systems, giving rise to a bioeconomy, which will respect and promote the regenerative powers of life.

World religions before globalization

World religions have existed since long before contemporary globalization. World religions are commonly understood to be those that claim universal validity, take their mission over many parts of the world, or cover large proportions of humanity. Moments in life – birth, coming of

⁵ Not only crude oil, but all the earth’s raw materials are limited. When the supply of uranium, iron, copper and so on becomes too expensive due to growing demand and dwindling resources, the “refuse industry” of today will become a recycling industry, so that the consumption of raw materials can be replaced by a loop of recyclable materials.

age, marriage and death⁶ – are universally marked by celebration and religious observance: these are family religions, and they are found everywhere. The cycles of nature – the solstices, the phases of the moon, spring and autumn, seed-time and harvest – are also marked by celebration: these are nature religions, and they exist everywhere. World religions, however, are something more than this religious celebration of life's events, for they offer something universal. Just what do they offer?

- a) Political religions emerged with the founding of states. These religions are invariably monotheistic: one god, one ruler, one empire, with the ruler also acting as high priest of heaven.⁷ This is how the ancient emperor cults of Rome, Persia, China and Japan, Genghis Khan and the Indian Moguls were formed. In China, the “Son of Heaven” faced the children of earth as their lord and priest. His empire was as universal as the heavens that arch over the earth. The domain of his rule was concomitant with the heavenly domain of salvation.⁸ Such political world religions have been an essential element of world empires right up into the modern era. Far from suppressing family and nature religions, political religions protect them and, within their territory, are thoroughly tolerant.
- b) Buddhism is probably the oldest non-state world religion. It is a monastic religion of meditation and inner balance. Thus it fits comfortably with common family and nature religions and poses no conflict for the political religions of rulers. In Japan, it exists in harmony with both state and folk Shinto. Buddhism was popularized in China through scriptures brought from India and then translated. Even today, Buddhism works not through aggression but through appeal. Its universality lies not in its charisma but in its attractiveness. Buddhism is rarely exclusive. Buddhist practices can well be combined with other religious forms, as in the Three Religions Movement in Japan or the Five Religions Movement in Taiwan. Buddhism does not demand a monogamous relationship: you definitely can have other gods besides it.
- c) The Abrahamic world religions are different. They are rooted in the exclusivity of the God of Israel. Christianity and Islam are referred to as religions of prophecy or religions of history because they are rooted in historic salvation events and spread the news of the universal significance of these events through active mission. They transform the particular exclusivity of the God of Israel into the exclusive universality of the One God, who has revealed himself in Christ or in the Koran. This is why their missions are aggressive and their faith exclusive. One must make a decision and submit to their faith. Not least, they have a tendency to take on the form of imperial political religions and set up Christian or Islamic empires. The Christianization of the Roman Empire gave rise to the empires of Europe, which ended in mutual destruction and collapse in the First World War. Even the USA is no longer “the empire”.⁹

⁶ This has been aptly shown by Theodor Sundermeier in *Religion – Was ist das?* (Religion – what is it?), Lembeck, Frankfurt, 2007.

⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, “Theologische Kritik der politischen Religion” (A theological critique of political religion) in Johann Baptist Metz, Jürgen Moltmann, Willi Oelmüller, *Kirche im Prozess der Aufklärung* (Church in the process of enlightenment), Munich/Mainz, 1970, pp. 11–52.

⁸ See Jan Assmann, *Herrschaft und Heil. Politische theologie in Altägypten, Israel und Europa* (Lordship and salvation. Political theology in ancient Egypt, Israel and Europe), Carl Hanser, Munich, 2000.

⁹ Jörg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times*, Augsburg Fortress, Philadelphia, 2007.

World religions since globalization

The pre-modern world was primarily an agrarian culture and was centred on the rhythms and cycles of the earth. We therefore talk of pre-modern cosmic religions. The industrial revolution signalled the dawn of the anthropocentric age. Humans no longer oriented their cultures by nature on earth or the stars in the sky; instead, they created their cultures according to their own ideas. The human being became the centre of the world, between heaven and earth, and the centre of its own self-created world.¹⁰ The world was made into the world of the human being, and nature on earth was demoted to being merely the environment for human civilization.

At the hub of the pre-modern world lies the village, and the village lies in its own landscape. At the hub of the modern world lies the city, which often has no interaction with the landscape on which it stands, or even with the sun in the blue sky. Over 50 percent of all people today live in megacities, cities of 10 million to 35 million inhabitants, such as Mexico City, Lagos and Chongqing. In these distended urban monsters, nature religion has died, and the old family religions are losing their families. Religion is forced to focus on the individualized human being and on his or her needs. Today's urbanized, globalized world makes all religions world religions, if three conditions are fulfilled:

1. The separation of religion and politics. Modern states are secular states and do not need a state religion. State religion does still exist in some parts of the Islamic world, and Burma has even made an official religion of Buddhism, but elsewhere, the wisdom of Jesus' words to "give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and give to God the things that are God's" (Mark 12:17) applies. This draws a clear dividing line between the worship of God and national interests.
2. Once religion is no longer a matter for the political commonwealth, it becomes a private matter. The modern world practises religious tolerance by guaranteeing individual religious freedom: no one may be discriminated against because of his or her religion. All individuals are free to choose their own religion, to change their religion or to belong to no religion.
3. The modern, globalized, urbanized world is therefore becoming a multi-religious society. Through missionaries, radio, television and the Internet, any religion can go global and gain adherents all over the world. So we have latter-day shamans in California and Tibetan Buddhists in Germany. The conditions outlined above and the media of the modern world have enabled every religion to have a presence in every part of the world. But in what form?
4. The world religions are freely accessible in a spiritual and religious marketplace. As religious "products" they are subordinated to the desire of the religious "customer" – and that alters religions fundamentally. They are turning into opportunities for individual religiosity and, thus, into options that are universally open to every individual. However, taken to its extreme, this means a Judaism with no Torah, a Christianity with no Sermon on the Mount, an Islam with no Sharia, and Buddhist meditation with no asceticism: religion lite, patchwork religion. But a religion that makes no demands can offer no comfort.

¹⁰ Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man* (1486).

Many Religions – One Earth

Gaia theory

“Earth” has many meanings, depending on context. When we talk in terms of air – water – earth, we mean the solid ground on which we stand. In religion, “earth” can stand for the duality of the world – heaven and earth, or the visible and invisible world.¹¹ In astronomical terms, we mean “the blue planet”, whose beautiful image we have been enabled to see thanks to space flight. So, in the first sense, “earth” is the land, where we grow our crops and raise our livestock; in the second, it is the habitat of earthly life, in contrast to the heavens of the gods; in the third, it is our life source and our home.

Modern astronomical science has demonstrated the interdependency between the populated and unpopulated parts of our planet. This view has given rise to the idea that the biosphere of this earth, together with its atmosphere, oceans and landmasses, forms one unique, complex system, and that this system can be understood, for the sake of comparison, in terms of an “earth organism”, as it has the capacity to bring forth life forms and create habitats for them. This is James Lovelock’s much-discussed Gaia hypothesis. Lovelock wanted to call the earth system he had described a “universal biocybernetic system with a tendency to homeostasis”, but his neighbour, the poet William Golding, offered the Greek name “Gaia”, after the goddess of the earth. And thus the theory became known as Gaia theory. It is not an attempt to deify the earth, but an understanding of this planet earth as an organism that creates life and creates the habitats for life to exist in many forms.¹² The earth is not an agglomeration of materials and forces; it is not blind or deaf; nor is it simply the environment for human cultures. Rather, it is to be viewed as one great subject, bringing forth life, upholding life, creating the conditions necessary for life, neutralizing chemical compounds that are hostile to life and, not least, developing ever more complex forms of life. We humans are ourselves creatures of the earth. At a certain point in its development, the earth began to feel, to think, to become self-aware and to experience awe.¹³ To truly understand our humanity, we must begin not with ourselves, but with the earth, the “nature subject”. Gaia theory puts an end to the anthropocentrism of the modern world and clears the

¹¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *Ethik der Hoffnung* (Ethics of hope), Gütersloher Verlagshaus, Gütersloh, 2010, p. 128ff.

¹² James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*, Oxford, 1979; and *The Ages of Gaia: A biography of our living Earth*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988; *The Revenge of Gaia: Why the Earth is Fighting Back – And How We Can Still Save Humanity*, Penguin, London, 2008. There is some discussion as to whether the earth can be described as “living”. If we apply the term “living” only to things that can reproduce, then no, the earth is not “alive”. However, if we see the earth as the source and habitat of other life, then we can indeed call it “living” to a greater extent. Only in a comparative sense does it mean anything to call the earth an “organism”: much more than just a lump of matter and energy, the earth can, in the interplay of its ecosystems, be compared to an “organism”, but it is something greater than any of the organisms that inhabit it. For it is also meaningful to talk of the earth as a “nature subject”, as Ernst Bloch proposed: in its reactions to what happens on it and beyond it, earth shows itself as more of an active subject than a passive object. Fundamentally, though, planet earth and the life that it brings forth are (as far as we know) a one-off, a unique creation *sui generis*; therefore, comparisons are impossible. From a theological point of view, the earth is a creative creation, and in that, it is like nothing else but humanity itself. For a discussion, see Celia Deane-Drummond, “God and Gaia: Myth or Reality?” in *Theology* 95, 1992, 277–85; and Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 2010, 179–80.

¹³ Leonardo Boff, “Earth as Gaia: An Ethical and Spiritual Challenge”, in *Concilium*, 2009, No. 3, pp. 24–32.

way for a democratic integration of the human race into the life of the earth system as a whole. This theory provides the bridge for the ecological reconstruction of our globalized world and our modern worldviews.

God – Earth – Humanity

The Abrahamic world religions, in contrast to nature religions, are known as “religions of history”, since their God reveals himself in the world of humanity, and is only secondarily recognized in the world of nature. This view sets up an anthropocentrism whereby humanity stands between the divine and the earthly: as the image of God, humanity is appointed ruler of the earth:

- the Divine;
- humanity;
- earth.

In the *Tao Te Ching*, we find a different order:

Man follows earth.
Earth follows heaven.
Heaven follows Tao.
Tao follows what is natural.¹⁴

I do not propose to go into a discussion here on Taoism’s teachings on nature,¹⁵ but merely to draw attention to this alternative order:

- Tao;
- heaven;
- earth;
- the human being.

The symbol in Taoism for the emergence of earth’s myriad creatures is not the masculine image of creation, but the feminine picture of birth:

The beginning of the universe
is the mother of all things.
Knowing the mother, one also knows the sons.¹⁶

We must understand the earth to understand humanity. The ancient wisdom of the Hebrew Bible hints at this point, which forms the foundation for the Abrahamic religions. According to the creation story, the earth is commanded to “bring forth living creatures of every kind” (Gen 1:24), and man himself is “formed . . . from the dust of the ground” (Gen 2:7). The Noachic covenant, which holds meaning for Jews, Christians and Muslims alike, is a twofold covenant. It is at once God’s covenant with “[Noah] and [his] descendants after [him], and with every living creature” (Gen 9:9–10), and

¹⁴ *Tao Te Ching*, Gia Fu Feng and Jane English (trans) Vintage, New York, 1997, Chapter 25.

¹⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, “TAO – The Chinese Mystery of the World. Lao Tsu’s *Tao Te Ching* Read with Western Eyes”, in Moltmann, *Science and Wisdom*, SCM Press, London, 2003, 172–93.

¹⁶ *Tao Te Ching*, Gia Fu Feng and Jane English (trans) Chapter 52.

God's covenant with the earth (Gen 9:13) and every living creature. Thus the Noachic covenant is both, on the one hand, *God – human being – life – earth*, and, on the other, *God – earth – life – human being*.¹⁷

To me, this means that we must now forge dialectically a connection between these two modes of understanding: we must understand life and the earth from a human point of view, and at the same time comprehend humanity and life from the perspective of the earth. It is earth that enables humanity to understand the heavens and the Tao, and it is through humanity that life on earth attains self-awareness.

The earth as the space for encounter and cooperation between world religions

In the past, the world religions have considered that their universal relevance and scope extended only as far as the human world. But if that human world is embedded in the nature of the earth and cannot survive without it, then the universal scope of the world religions in fact extends to Gaia itself.¹⁸ They can be truly world religions only if they become earth religions, and view humanity as an integrated element in planet earth as a whole. If the missionary religions of history are to reach the ends of the earth, they must transform themselves into universal religions of the earth. To do this, they must rediscover the forgotten ecological wisdom and natural reverence of local nature religions. True, those mountain gods and river goddesses were worshipped only within their own lands, but the transformation of the world religions into earth religions will take place only when they globalize that local ecological wisdom and reverence for nature and enable the rights of the earth to be honoured. In the past, many adherents of the world religions have looked down on nature religions, thinking them primitive. As those religions metamorphose into earth religions, their members will acknowledge their error and seek to reinterpret that pre-industrial wisdom for our post-industrial age. For if the world religions cannot achieve this result, who can?

A South African friend told me the following story. Whenever his father wanted to make a canoe, my friend would have to chop down a tree. But in order to fell the tree, he would first have to ask the tree spirit for forgiveness. Then a Christian missionary came and said, "This is idolatry. Subdue the earth and chop down the tree." Yet now, environmentalists come and say, "No, no, your father was right. Trees and forests are a vital part of the earth's organism. If you have to fell a tree, ask the earth for forgiveness and plant a new tree in its place."

World religions are invariably focused on the world beyond; this is why they concentrate on immanent universality. The Nirvana of Buddhist religions and the God of the monotheistic religions both have their being beyond this world. Imperial political religions, too, raise the emperor up to the position of a son of heaven to contrast him against the children of earth. For these world religions, the "world" is not all there is; the world is mundane, painful, mortal, futile and temporary. It cannot be a fitting home for an immortal human soul. Only the unseen world of heaven, the gods or Nirvana can offer a soul salvation, peace or a paradise of wishes that are unfulfilled on earth. With their focus on the world beyond, the world religions have offered

¹⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *Ethik der Hoffnung: der Gottesbund der Erde* (Ethics of hope: God's covenant with the earth), Gütersloher Verlagshaus, Gütersloh, 2010, 172.

¹⁸ As expressed in the Introduction to the 1990 Chicago Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions.

comfort in the strangeness of this world, but have also made this world into a stranger. They have paid for their solace in the world beyond with a negation of this-worldly life. In so doing, they have themselves become contributing factors in today's ecological crisis. They have often spent more time preaching denial of earthly life than affirmation of it; they have often promoted respect for life more than love for it.

If the world religions are to reach “the ends of the earth”, they must turn back to the earth and give it back the beauties and virtues that they have projected onto the world beyond.¹⁹ They must abandon their denial of life, their capacity for violence and their promises of redemption in the world beyond.²⁰ To put it in secular terms, world religions must seriously engage with the ecological perspective and start by applying it to themselves. For if the earth can no longer support life, that means the end of the human world, and the end of world religions.

The Hebrew Bible offers us an “earth religion” in the form of the Sabbath year. Every seventh year, the people are to leave the land fallow.²¹ Two reasons are given: “so that the poor of your people may eat”, and so that there may be “a Sabbath of complete rest for the land”. Sabbath rest for the earth is blessed by God, for this year allows the land to become fruitful again. If the people observe the Sabbath for the earth, they will live secure in the land. If they disobey this command, they will be cast out of the land and scattered among the nations for 70 years, until God's land has recovered. This old story gives us a grave warning: if we fail to observe the earth religion and force the earth to bear fruit constantly, using artificial fertilizers, we will exhaust the ground and make it infertile. The deserts will spread, droughts will become more frequent, and eventually the human race will disappear from the earth that it has wrecked and abused.

My vision for the future of the world religions is well expressed in an image taken from China. Whenever I'm in China or Taiwan, I have always loved to buy the beautiful wall paintings found in those countries. Whatever else they depict, they always include a waterfall, bringing living water from heaven to earth. That's a powerful symbol. My dream is that one day, the religions of the world will flow like fresh water, from beyond into our world, making the joy of heaven the delight of earth and bringing the water of life from eternity into time. For all the world's religions, I long for the kingdom of God to come “on earth as it is in heaven”.

¹⁹ Such is the purpose of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies* (1922).

²⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer's desire was to use the Old Testament message of God's justice on earth to free Christianity from the chains of being a Gnostic salvation religion and make it “this-worldly”. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, SCM Press, London, 2001.

²¹ For a discussion of the ecological significance of the Old Testament Sabbath laws, see Jürgen Moltmann, *Creating a Just Future: The Politics of Peace and the Ethics of Creation in a Threatened World*, SCM Press, London, 1983, pp. 61–66.