

Oneness and Cultivating Unity

Anne Primavesi, Dromantine, 15 September 2012

Twenty years ago, at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio, the Latin American Churches asked the World Council of Churches (WCC) to address the issue of militarism because the UN conference would only speak about ‘defence’. I was given that task. We met in a seminary in an industrialised area outside Rio where the “whites” at the conference were warned not to go outside the campus because they would not be safe. People of colour, however, would go unnoticed in a local population descended from slaves who were brought into the country to work on plantations during the colonisation of the continent by European Christians hundreds of years earlier.

Since that Rio Conference, we have had two Iraq wars, the invasion of Afghanistan and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction as well as billions spent on deadly military drones. In this time of climate change, when economic capital needs to be spent on safeguarding the planetary resources of all life on earth, both the funding and the effects of the militarism of the leading Christian nations are, by default, one of the greatest human threats to those resources.

This is the case because in a global capitalist culture dominated by militarised world economies, the problem is agreeing on and funding positive political decisions based on scientific premises about climate change: decisions that favour both those we think of as friends and those we think of as enemies. To do this would go against the aims and perceived national interests of governmental and bureaucratic apparatuses that create and maintain massive ‘defence’ and ‘security’ industries. These have been built up within a pervasive climate of fear, jingoistic conformity and despair of change that renders any thought of a different world order seem idle fantasy. Maintaining, indeed prioritising, them means that ecologically, they are dead weight: army units, guns, surveillance systems, obsolete and developing nuclear weapons as well as propaganda engines are extraordinarily expensive – and produce nothing (Graeber 2011: 382). Except, of course, death, desolation and desecration of the land.

Simultaneously, scientific technologies are contributing positively to raising awareness of our global interconnectedness: offering unprecedented opportunities for seeing our individual lives as interdependent and sustained by the same earthly resources as all other creatures. But what life-enhancing political and economic conclusions are drawn from these scientific data-

based premises? Such conclusions are not part of the scientific agenda: nor do scientists see drawing such conclusions as part of their job description. That has been my experience over the past 20 years. Most recently I was at a conference on 'planetary resources', a concept formulated and researched by the scientist Johan Rockstrom as a new approach to global sustainability. The name speaks for itself. Transgressing one or more boundaries of those resources may be deleterious or even catastrophic due to the risk of triggering non-linear, abrupt environmental change within continental to planetary scale systems. The resources include climate change, ocean acidification; stratospheric ozone; biogeochemical nitrogen; phosphorus inflow to oceans; global freshwater use and the rate at which biological diversity is lost (See Rockstrom website in References).

At question time, I asked about the possible impact of militarism on these planetary resources. The question was courteously received by Rockstrom, but sidestepped, indeed dismissed as irrelevant by other scientists. I raised the scientific question out of a theological concern about the oneness of our planetary existence which, for me, is the greatest theological as well as scientific challenge of our time. And it is against that background that I talk about seeing 'Oneness' and 'Cultivating Unity' as the context and defining purpose of an eco-congregation today.

This theological context was most powerfully defined for me in 1931 by the German Jewish Rabbi Leo Baeck:

What, then, is this new principle, this force that means revolution? Put in its briefest form, it is the idea and the challenge of the One. This challenging idea is firstly the One Thing, the one thing that alone is needful, that which has been commanded, the good, the right. Secondly and mainly, it means the one Being who has proclaimed this One Thing and demands it from us, the One God beside whom there is none else. And finally, it means the unity and totality of humankind [with all living beings]. It means that through this One Thing, and therefore with our whole heart and soul, we are to serve the one God (Baeck 1958: 23-24).

Baeck's unified and revolutionary vision of our lives on Earth comes from someone who later endured the horrors of Theresienstadt concentration camp; emerging from it as an eloquent embodiment of peacefully meeting 'the challenge of the One'. For him, it meant carrying out the command to do what is needful, the right and the good, even in the direst circumstances. The revolutionary force of his deceptively simple message of oneness not only continues to challenge ideas about our lives and about the world today. It also challenges us to make the principle of the 'One' an earthly reality. In

its simplest terms, this requires ‘One Thing’ from us: a living, wholehearted commitment to doing what is good and right within and for the One Community of Life on Earth; a community sustained by a unified system of planetary resources. For Baeck, the religious, revolutionary force unifying the world is the belief that, through doing what is good and right for all within that community, we serve the One God: and so love, reverence and preserve the Oneness of life.

‘Cultivating Unity’, which I take as the defining purpose of an eco-congregation, is a phrase used by Richard Pervo (in the latest *Hermeneia* commentary on Acts) to translate the Greek *koinonia*. Instead of the usual translations of ‘fellowship’ or ‘brotherhood’ it denotes the bond between belief and action exemplified both in Jesus’s life and in that of his apostles (Acts 2:42). Pervo defines the revolutionary force behind this early Christian lifestyle as ‘cultivating unity’; that is, ‘cultivating oneness’. This is what it means to serve the God of Jesus: as opposed to the militarist *koinon* or cult of a deified Roman Emperor. The clash between the two is played out in the account of Peter’s reluctant conversion to the idea of welcoming the Roman centurion, Cornelius into the apostolic community (Primavesi 2011: 17-20)

In her commentary on Galatians Brigitte Kahl notes that from the perspective of Rome, *koinonia* between Messianic Jews and uncircumcised Gauls (or Galatians) must have appeared as an upsetting irregularity. It implied lawless conduct and disturbed the *koinon* in as much as it interfered with provincial reverence for the divine emperor (Primavesi 2011: 118). But that *koinon* is what has prevailed within European Christianity since the Council of Nicea (325 CE). It is described in Eusebius’s account of the Council’s concluding imperial banquet:

Detachments of the bodyguard and troops surrounded the entrance of the palace with drawn swords, and through the midst of them the men of God proceeded without fear into the innermost of the imperial apartments, in which some were the emperor’s companions at table while others reclined on couches arranged on either side. One might have thought this a picture of Christ’s kingdom!

This mythic Roman militarist *koinon* has prevailed within European Christianity. Yet the ideal of *koinonia* persisted and persists as a challenge to Christians; both individually and as members of official Christian churches. The challenge is met wherever ‘doing what is right and good’ means refusing to differentiate between humans on the grounds of race, religion or sex in order to justify violence against them; and refusing to use

any distinction between ourselves and all other-than-human creatures in order to justify violence against them.

Where the challenge is positively met, it is a good and right response to Jesus's appeal to live peaceably; an appeal he based on the unity of God's practical and nondiscriminatory concern for all Earth's creatures:

Love your enemies and pray for those persecuting you so that you may become sons and daughters of your Father; for he raises his sun on bad and good, and rains on the just and unjust (Matthew 5:44-45; Luke 6:27-28, 35c-d).

It also pays heed to his uncompromising prayer that we may receive the Father's forgiveness '*as we forgive those who trespass against us*'. As a Jew subject in life as in death to Roman military authority, Jesus's appeal to love and forgive our enemies (which implicitly means they are no longer seen as enemies) means acting nonviolently toward them. It foreshadows Leo Baeck's emphasis on doing what is good and right for all, regardless of their attitude to us personally. This is the proper religious response to the One creating and sustaining the life of all through the gift of Earth's planetary resources.

So doing what is good and right for all is a moral imperative: one that may make life-changing demands on us, even to death itself. It is a positive response to the biblical vision of God: *Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is One!* (Deuteronomy 6:4) This God 'is not partial and takes no bribes', or, in modern terms, 'has no favourites' (Deuteronomy 10:17). This is a God who sees our lives as a whole; whose unifying gaze encompasses all creatures within a land that supports all life from the beginning of the year to its end:

And if you will obey my commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil. And he shall give grass in your fields for your cattle, and you shall eat and be full (Deuteronomy 11:13-15).

This religious premise for living nonviolently, for supporting and being supported by a peaceable earth community, is now endorsed by the social/scientific Gaian paradigm. Its basic premise is that we have no scientific mandate either to assume we are independent of, or in charge of, the natural world to which we belong. What we do have is a unique ability to understand the laws that govern and unify that world and, based on that understanding, a corresponding rational desire to live accordingly.

Presently, our insights into climate change and its effects are based on the scientific premise that the sun and the rain, temperature rises and droughts, ocean acidification and air pollution ultimately affect friend and foe, cattle and grass, bee and bear, bird and fish, tree and seed alike. And that our lifestyles are now making disproportionate demands on this shared resource base. The scientific premise now serves as a solid ground for the religious exhortation to live peaceably.

So in practice, continuous scientific monitoring of the effects of climate change on the global atmosphere, on wildlife, on biodiversity, on plant life, on seas worldwide and on the melting of the Arctic ice cap not only challenges North Atlantic governments to continue funding such research. It should also challenge them to increase it by *discontinuing* funding the production of ever more sophisticated and deadly weaponry: such as the nuclear submarines housed in Scotland at Faslane and in France at Ile Longue, with their warheads supplied and maintained by the United States.

Meanwhile, the religious Christian *koinon*, in its many official forms, prays for peace while investing large amounts of its pension funds in mining corporations and weapons manufacture. This would have come as no surprise to Leo Baeck. In his lifetime, the Christian churches in Germany not only supported the greatest human military machine in twentieth-century history: they also acquired particular infamy by supporting policies aimed at exterminating its Jewish subjects. In his magisterial study *The Churches and the Third Reich*, Klaus Scholder notes that, during March 1933, internal and external legal changes took place at the end of which Protestantism publicly endorsed the Nationalist revolution and Catholicism offered a thinly disguised capitulation to it. In both churches at that time the decision was taken that no comment would be made on the terrorism of the new system and, in particular, on the persecution of the Jews now beginning in Germany.

This decision did not go unchallenged, nor was it made in a day. Rather, it was the result of a development in which political and church-political arguments gained the upper hand over simple Christian responsibility (Scholder 1987: 254-255).

The legal changes based on ‘rational antisemitism’(!) were argued for on the basis of *human* difference, that is, on having one’s heredity defined by the Jewish race in contrast to the smaller Central European races: out of which, according to Lutheran tradition, the German ‘Volk’ was formed. The church’s position was determined ‘not by political factors’, but rather by ‘participation in the sacraments’. While in retrospect, says Scholder, this may seem incomprehensible or inadequate and even scandalous, during the 1920s there had been a plethora of special laws for racial as well as ethnic

minorities throughout the civilised world; without the political and church public feeling that this was a basic abrogation of the rule of law. It was no accident that Scripture scholar and theologian Otto Dibelius rejected the intervention and criticism of the American churches in regard to the treatment of the Jews with the argument that the German churches were not intervening in the American Negro question (Scholder 1987: 375).

What remained largely unexpressed within the official Christian churches, or even considered, was the striking similarity between the social position of Jesus in Roman Palestine, the Jews in Germany and that of the vast majority of American negroes (Thurman: 34). Those German and American pastors who did express pastoral concern on these grounds saw that Christians had drawn great guilt upon themselves by keeping silent when they should have spoken out. Neither Protestant nor Roman Catholic Churches took part in political resistance to Hitler's policies in the strict sense, though there were numerous personal links with it. So those who resisted, like the Protestant pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jesuit priest Alfred Delp, were considered outsiders in their two churches (Scholder 1989: 118-119).

This structural moral failure within the Christian *koinon* is integral to and implicit in European colonization and has long been painfully evident to indigenous colonised peoples. Negro Christian scholar Howard Thurman notes the simple historical fact that Jesus was a Jew and that it is impossible to understand him outside the sense of community that Israel held with God. How different, Thurman exclaimed, might have been the story of the last two thousand years if the link between Jesus and Israel had never been severed! The second important fact is that Jesus was a poor Jew. The economic predicament with which he was identified by birth placed him within the great mass of human beings on earth. The third fact is that, unlike Paul, who was a Roman citizen, Jesus was a member of a minority group within the control of the dominant force, the *koinon* of the Roman Empire. All these facts, said Thurman, remain important.

It is also important that Jesus's life and teaching accords with the Jewish religious basis of Baeck's 'One Thing'. It brings into sharper focus the corresponding and essential role to be played by Christians exercising *koinonia*, cultivating unity *between all living creatures* on the basis of God's indiscriminate love for them. For an eco-congregation, such *cultivation* is a defining, ongoing activity that consciously unifies our individual relationships with God with those of all earthly lives nourished by planetary resources: regardless of species, race, creed or power. That is the fundamental religious as well as scientific basis for our living peaceably (Primavesi 2011: 14-29, 80-97).

It is also at the heart of Baeck's 'One Thing', demanded of us more urgently now by science rather than by religion. But on either basis or rather, on both together, it means raising our awareness of living in an already unified earth community; and then rising to the challenge posed by that reality. Now more than ever, the challenge is a moral as well as a scientific one. Yet within major Christian communities preserving this basic earthly unity has not been considered or seen, as it was by Jesus and by Baeck, as a categorical religious imperative that demands a collective as well as a personal response (Baeck 1958: 25).

Historically, the command to do what is good and right to everyone, regardless of race, religion or sex, has been more breached than observed in Christendom. Indeed, the challenge has been met most consistently and successfully by Buddhist nations, Gandhi-inspired political movements and small peace-based Christian religious communities such as Quakers, the Amish and other such groups and individuals. Having rejected the militant theology of the *koinon* embodied in Roman imperial Christianity and its offshoots, in different ways the latter try to embody Jesus's vision of a positive, life-enhancing response to God's indiscriminate gifts that sustain the One sacred community of Earthly life in all its diversity.

References

- Baeck, L. (1958). *God and Man in Judaism*. London, Valentine, Mitchell and Co
- Graeber, D. (2011). *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. New York, Melville House Publishing.
- Pervo, R. I. (2009). *Acts: A Commentary*. Minneapolis, Fortress Press.
- Primavesi, A. (2011). *Cultivating Unity within the Biodiversity of God*. Salem, Oregon, Polebridge Press.
- Rockstrom, J. at <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol14/iss2/art32>
- Scholder, K. (1987). *The Churches and the Third Reich*. London, SCM Press.
- Scholder, K. (1989). *A Requiem for Hitler and Other New Perspectives on the German Church Struggle*. London, SCM.
- Thurman, H. (1976). *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Boston, Beacon Press.