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THE LOVING EYE VS. THE ARROGANT EYE: A Christian Critique of the Western Gaze on Nature and the Third World¹

Sallie McFague

I. Introduction

*T*he topic of this Roundtable, "Nature, People, and Globalization," is immense in both scope and importance, too immense to consider as a whole. I propose to look at one issue, climate change, from one perspective, that of Christianity, as a case study in how nature, people, and globalization interrelate. David Hallman, coordinator of the Climate Change Programme of the World Council of Churches, has written, "Climate change provides a useful case study of the ecological threats to creation and the economic and social inequities within and between societies caused by current economic systems and practices."² In other words, climate change, interwoven as it is with the globalizing economy, is an issue that involves not only the deterioration of nature but also an increasing rift between rich and poor nations. It is an excellent example of how our most basic problems are interconnected: climate change is not just about the climate. It is about the economy, about the natural world, and about people.

However, as a member of the First World, which has created the majority of greenhouse gases causing climate change, I am highly conscious of the presumption of First World global solutions. Moreover, the problem is so immense and complex that there is no one answer. What we need are specific and diverse local as well as national and international strategies, with one of the most important being firm commitments by leading polluting nations to drastically reduce their emissions. But there are also many other dimensions of the problem

where other strategies are called for. My contribution to this conference is one such strategy.

It will be addressed to First World Christians from a First World Christian, to the adherents of a religion that has a long history of both contributing to the destruction of nature and to the colonization of other people, notably those in the so-called Third World. I will sketch out a spirituality toward creation and other people that, I believe, is intrinsic to Christian faith and could serve as a basis for a change of heart and action in regard to the issue of global warming. In other words, I will be asking if there is a Christian basis for addressing the economic, ecological, and justice issues involved in global warming. More specifically, can Christianity help us imagine a notion of the abundant life that is not built upon a high-energy consumer economy, the economy that underlies climate change? What contribution might Christianity make to this global conversation? This contribution will be in two parts, the main essay and an appendix, the latter being a brief study guide for Christians to use in local congregations.

Before we suggest what this contribution might be, we need to lay out some facts about the present situation in regard to climate change. Climate change is concerned with the natural blanket of gases surrounding the earth that has kept it warm enough for life to evolve and prosper. During the last few hundred years, however, we have added extra amounts of gas, especially carbon dioxide (from the burning of fossil fuels in cars and industry as well as clearing forests), CFCs (found in air conditioners, refrigerators, etc.), and methane (emitted from garbage dumps, rice fields, and cattle). The mean temperature of the earth has risen 0.5 degrees Celsius over the last century. But until recently the human influence on climate change has not been certain. In 1995, however, the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change, a group of 2,000 scientists from more than 100 nations, submitted a report stating that human influence was now a certainty. The scientists also projected that by the end of the next century, the earth's mean temperature would rise by approximately 2.5 degrees Celsius (with a greater increase at high latitudes). Their conclusions were both sufficiently modest and confident that no minority report was filed. How serious would such an increase be? During the last Ice Age, the earth's mean temperature was only 5 to 6 degrees Celsius *cooler* than it is now; hence, one can see that a 2.5-degree Celsius *increase* is substantial. What would be the results of such an increase? Here are a few examples:

- a drier and hotter climate in North America (where 50 percent of the world's grain is grown);
- melting of the polar ice caps, resulting in rising sea levels and the flooding of low-lying areas (Bangladesh, for instance, could lose one-sixth of its area, displacing 25 million people);
- extreme weather incidents (droughts, floods, tornadoes, forest fires, hurricanes, heat waves, snowstorms), which are already occurring;
- decrease in arable land and fresh water, engendering wars and displacement of populations; and
- stress on forests, grasslands, and other ecosystems, with the accompanying loss of plant and animal species.

There has always been climate change; the problem now is the speed with which it is occurring, a speed for which we are responsible.

What should we do? Some people think we should do nothing. In fact, many are in denial that global warming is occurring, a denial similar to the tobacco industry's long denial, in spite of scientific evidence to the contrary, that nicotine is addictive and bad for one's health. Since we don't *want* global warming to happen and since to address the problem would mean costly changes at both personal and business levels, then it *isn't* happening. In an article in the *Nation* titled "The Greenhouse Spin," David Helvarg writes, "In the United States, big oil is conducting a successful multimillion dollar disinformation campaign on global warming. To consider what the greenhouse backlash, funded by the most powerful industrial combine in human history, might be willing to do next is not a calming thought."³ Since global warming is no longer a matter of scientific uncertainty, we need to get out of denial and act. At the very least, we need to stabilize emissions in order to avert the most severe climate impacts. To do this would require a 60- to 80-percent reduction of emissions as of today. Where are we on this trajectory? In spite of promises by the major developed countries in 1992 at the Rio Earth Summit to reduce emissions by the year 2000 to their 1990 levels, few of these countries, including the United States, are close to that goal.

Can nothing be done? Should we feel apocalyptic about global warming? No—since we created the problem, presumably, we can do something about it. We can improve energy efficiency, conserve energy resources, and develop renewable sources. This needs to be done at all levels, from global trade agreements (where environmental costs should be factored in and wealthier nations help the less wealthy

develop clean energy sources) to personal energy use (every time we use a gallon of gas, one large tree is needed to absorb the carbon dioxide it creates). But we must have the *will* to act. The issue is not mainly *what* to do—we have a lot of the knowledge we need—but the *will* to do it.

Hence, my small contribution to this planetary conversation on climate change is at that level—the level of the will to change, and I will be addressing it specifically from a Christian perspective. What deeper spirituality toward nature and other people could help us accept the seriousness of global warming *and* do something about it?

II. Subject-Object Dualism

Liberation theologian Leonardo Boff sets our theme with these words: “The earth is crying out and the poor are crying out, both victims of both social and environmental injustice.”⁴ Violence against nature and violence against poor people join together to warn the First World of a sickness at the heart of Western culture.

The result of Western violence and injustice is epitomized in a poor Third World woman and her First World counterpart. A poor woman, especially a poor woman of color, could be considered the representative human being of the twenty-first century. Such a woman is a barometer of the health of humanity and of nature. Living as she does at the juncture of human poverty and environmental deterioration, she is the place where we should look to answer the question of how human beings and nature are faring on our planet. We cannot answer this question by looking at First World elites or even Third World elites. These people mask the truth, for they have the power to live well at the expense of the planet—and of the poor. If we look only at them, everything seems fine. But when we turn our eyes to our poor sister we see that neither nature nor the majority of human beings are doing well. She does not have the power to direct the planet’s dwindling resources for her own use. In her increasing poverty, we see also the growing poverty of the earth.

This woman and nature are not doing well for the same reason: the arrogant eye that objectifies the other for its own benefit. Women, nature, and the poor are viewed in the same way; the male gaze, the anthropocentric gaze, and the colonial gaze are similar. The Western elite has adopted this gaze: standing high on a hill, this Sole Subject looks out on the world as its object. Just as the rise of perspective in

Western painting during the Renaissance presented the world to the spectator from only one point of view, so also Western culture sees itself at the center with the world spread out and available for its benefit. At the close of the twentieth century, this arrogant gaze has resulted in the triumph of consumerism: nature is only “natural resources,” and other human beings, especially poor ones, are merely “human resources.”

Subject-object dualism is, I believe, the basic model that underlies Western ontology, epistemology, and ethics. In other words, it is the basis of our being, thinking, and doing. Subject-object dualism is so deep in Western affluent White culture that it is scarcely visible; it is just the way things are. One way to recognize its foundational character is to substitute a different model of being, thinking, and doing: a subject-subjects one. All other beings — certainly all other human beings but also mountains, rivers, animals, and plants — are subjects, different kinds of subjects, each with its own reason for being, which is *not* simply its use by us, the Sole Subject. This model suggests that we are *all*, human beings and nature, subjects relating to other subjects, each with its own value quite apart from usefulness to only one Subject. Of course, like the subject-object way of thinking, the subject-subjects way is also a *model* — neither is a description, both are social constructions, both are partial and relative. The question, as we shall see, is which model is better for the health of our planet and which one is closer to Christian faith? Leonardo Boff suggests the answer when he says that we need a “new courtesy toward creation” — how far that would be from the arrogant eye!⁵

It is this change in sensibility, from arrogance to courtesy, from objectification of others — other people and nature — to recognition of their subjecthood, that will be the focus of my small contribution as a White, Western, feminist, Christian theologian to the issue of global climate change. The World Council of Churches Assembly in Canberra, Australia (1991), called for a deeper spirituality in relation to creation, and I agree we need one. How might a deeper spirituality be a contribution? The World Council of Churches’ documents over the last several decades, which discuss the place of human beings in creation, stress again and again that a *will to change* is a critical first step toward such a spirituality. Statements such as the following are found throughout the documents: “the threat of accelerated climate change requires fundamental changes in the way people relate to one another and to the environment”; “it would require substantial changes in pol-

icy and lifestyle, especially in the North. All it takes is political will.”⁶ But what *causes* people to change? As the documents state, outside pressures — strong legislation, fear of consequences, lobbying groups—are essential, but they also mention inside pressure, the pressure of conscience—and, I would add, of love. People do change some because they feel they must, but they change most when they want to. We need a transformation of heart and soul, not just of will—we need a transformation of how we see our place in the scheme of things.

Christianity should wage a major critique of the subject-object model that underlies the arrogant gaze of Western culture. It should do so because at the heart of its own spirituality lies a very different model, the subject-subjects one. The simplest definition of Christian spirituality is contained in the Great Commandments: that we should love God with our whole heart and mind and our neighbor as ourselves. In other words, we should love God and neighbor as subjects, as worthy of our love just because of who they are and not as means to our ends. But most contemporary Western Christians place two restrictions on their tradition’s subject-subjects model. The first is that they forget Jesus’ radicalizing the model by making it pertain especially to the poor, the outcast, the oppressed. The poor woman, whether living in the First or Third World, epitomizes the recipient of Christian spirituality as it refers to humanity. As the representative human being of the twenty-first century, she is the neighbor who most deserves our attention and love.

The second restriction that most Christians (and not just Western ones) place on their spirituality is the exclusion of the natural world. Most Christians draw the line at nature: while God and other people are subjects, nature is not. Most of us either do not know how to relate to nature or we relate to it as Western culture does, as an object for our use. My suggestion is that we should relate to other creatures and the ecosystem *in the same basic way* we are supposed to relate to God and other people—as ends, not means; as subjects valuable in themselves, for themselves.

We read in Genesis that God looked at creation and said, “It is good.” In fact, God says this *seven* times (whereas “subduing” nature and having “dominion” over it is mentioned just once). God’s response to creation appears to be, in the most profound sense, an aesthetic one: appreciation for something in and for itself, of the other as other. The message of Genesis is not domination but appreciation. British novelist Iris Murdoch has written, “Love is the extremely diffi-

cult realization that something other than oneself is real. Love... is the discovery of reality.”⁷ She is illustrating, I believe, God’s gaze on creation, the gaze of the loving, not the arrogant, eye, the gaze of appreciation for the otherness, the subjecthood, of each and every bit of creation.

III. The Arrogant Eye and the Loving Eye

Made in God’s image, our eyes should imitate God’s: we should look at the world the way God does, with a loving, not an arrogant eye. What would this mean and what relevance does it have for developing a deeper spirituality toward nature? A brief comparison of the arrogant vs. the loving eye might help us answer this question. The arrogant eye and the loving eye, terms coined by feminist philosopher Marilyn Frye, are epitomized in the differences between staring and locking eyes.⁸ When staring, one looks *at* something as an object; when locking eyes, one connects *with* another as two subjects. Lovers lock eyes, but so do friends; one can also lock eyes with a lowland gorilla or, as Martin Buber perceptively notes, even with a tree. It all depends on whether one sees the other as an object (an “it”) or as a subject (a “thou”). Frye describes the arrogant eye as acquisitive, seeing everything in relation to the self — as either “for me” or “against me.” It organizes the world in reference to itself and cannot imagine “the possibility that the Other is independent, indifferent.”⁹ It simplifies in order to control, denying complexity, difference, and mystery, since it cannot control what it does not understand. The arrogant eye is the colonial, imperialistic, patriarchal eye that simplifies and controls the other — poor people and nature become human resources or natural resources. All of us in the White affluent West share this gaze, especially when it is turned on nature. The natural world is object *par excellence*. We break and train other life forms — domestic, farm, and zoo animals — to do our will, and we perceive forests, air and water, plants and wild animals as existing solely for our benefit. The natural world and its life forms have not been seen as having their health and integrity in and for themselves, but in and for us.

The subject-object dualism that lies behind the arrogant eye takes many forms, but in each case only the first member of the dualism is valued: humans-nature, male-female, North-South, White-People of Color, heterosexual-homosexual, rich-poor, and so on. As feminist ethicist Val Plumwood points out, traits such as rationality, initiative,

and order are associated with the first or subject member of the dualism, whereas emotionalism, passivity, and chaos with the second or object side of the dualism. This dualistic hierarchy places White, Western, affluent males over females, People of Color, the South, poor people, and nature, resulting in the colonizing attitude of the "master," which sees everything on the bottom side of the dualism not as a subject but as an object for its own use or pleasure. Plumwood outlines three key results of dualistic thinking. First, in dualism *the subject denies its dependency* on the other; thus masters deny their dependence on slaves, men on women's work, humans on nature's finite limitations, and the affluent North on the poor nations of the South. In fact, however, those in the "background" are essential to the foreground subjects, who could not exist without these unacknowledged others. Second, *the other is polarized through hyperseparation*: while only a small difference may separate the two parties (skin color or gender, for instance), radical exclusion is necessary in order to treat the other as an object. Differences are seen not as a matter of degree but as absolutes: for example, that humans and chimpanzees are 98 percent the same genetically is an uncomfortable fact for dualistic thinkers. Third, *the bottom side of the dualism is incorporated into the top side* by being defined in terms of it: it is merely a "lack." Its being is defined in terms of lacking what the top side has; thus, for instance, the poor are those who are "not rich," women are defined as lacking male genitalia, and other life forms in nature are graded on a scale of their proximity to or distance from the ability to reason as humans do. These three features of dualistic thinking—denial of dependency, hyperseparation, and incorporation—result in instrumentalism (permission to use the other to serve one's own purposes) and stereotyping (since the others are not subjects, but mere types, their particular needs and wishes need not be taken into consideration). Our representative poor Third World woman of color experiences all of these consequences of the arrogant eye—as does nature.

The loving eye, on the other hand, acknowledges complexity, mystery, and difference. It recognizes boundaries between the self and the other, that the interests of other people (and the natural world) are not identical with one's own, that knowing another takes time and attention. The loving eye is not the opposite of the arrogant eye: it does not substitute self-denial, romantic fusion, and subservience for distance, objectification, and exploitation. Rather, it suggests something novel in Western ways of knowing: acknowledgment of and respect for the

other as *subject*. There is nothing sentimental or weak-minded about this: it is simply the refusal to assume that subjectivity is my sole prerogative — the sole prerogative of Westerners, of men, of rich people, or even of human beings. To recall Murdoch's statement, "Love . . . is the discovery of reality." The loving eye is not the sentimental, mushy, soft eye; rather, it is the realistic, tough, no-nonsense "God's eye" that acknowledges what is so difficult for us to admit: that reality is made up of *others*. Love, then, is no big deal or a specific virtue reserved for religious people; it is simply facing facts, it is being "objective."

IV. What Is the Abundant Life?

Why is all this important for the deeper spirituality toward nature that the Canberra Assembly called for? It is important because these two ways of being in the world, the way of the arrogant eye built on the subject-object model and the way of the loving eye built on the subject-subjects model, pertain directly to what the World Council of Churches' documents call a shift from consumerism to a new concept of "abundance," to a new sense of what the good life *is*. Making this shift is one of the most important things we must do, not only to control global warming, but for all of us to have decent, enjoyable lives. The new understanding of abundance, of a quality life, arises, I believe, from acknowledging the subject-subjects model in all our dealings with the world. In Christian terms, it means extending this model to the outcast and the poor among humanity *and* to the natural world. Nature in our time is the "new poor" or the "also poor"; as such, it deserves our attention and love. As is becoming increasingly clear, the arrogant eye and its result, worldwide consumerism engineered by market forces driven by quantitative criteria alone, is creating a world uninhabitable by the poor Third World woman and her sisters and brothers in other parts of the planet. It is also destroying nature. From the point of view of Christian spirituality, such a life is not the abundant life; it neglects most of the world's people and exists at the expense of the natural world. A spirituality built on it would be limited to loving other people in one's own economic bracket. A Christian spirituality, however, must favor what is other and different, as well as those who are needy, including needy nature.

But is a Christian spirituality built on the subject-subjects model ridiculously utopian, merely pie-in-the-sky thinking? Isn't it necessary in many ways as well as most of the time to live and act within the sub-

ject-object model? Do we not have to *use* nature—and even other people? The simple answer, of course, is yes: workers *are* human resources, and water, soil, trees, and plants—and even animals—*are* natural resources. The question is whether they are mainly and basically resources, merely objects. What is our deepest attitude toward others, both human and nonhuman? Do we have that “new courtesy toward creation and other beings” that Boff calls for, a courtesy that, with the very acknowledgment of their subjecthood, could begin to change the way we Westerners live and vote, and spend our time and money? Charles Birch sums up the challenge to the affluent West eloquently: “The rich must live more simply that the poor may simply live.”¹⁰ And the poor in question, from the perspective of Christian spirituality, include the deteriorating natural world.

Below our necessary utilitarian attitude—the use we must make of others, both human and nonhuman, in order to survive—is the possibility of a deeper sensibility, one of appreciation of and respect for all others. This does not mean, as Buber shrewdly pointed out, that we will or can live in an I-Thou relationship with all others all the time. We cannot. To do so would be “heaven,” the kingdom of God, or in a nice variation, “the kindom of God.” But it could mean a substantial change in Western attitudes toward others, especially the Third World poor and nature, a change summed up by respect, limitation, and sharing. By respect I mean the acknowledgment of the subjecthood of all others, the recognition of their reality, their integrity, their desires and intentions; by limitation I mean the willingness of the First World to seriously cut back on the use of goods and energy; by sharing I mean the realization that other subjects, both human and nonhuman, deserve basic necessities in order to live. These three are interrelated: to the extent that Western culture is able to move from a subject-object model of being, thinking, and doing to a subject-subjects one, it would be willing to consider limitation of its own lifestyle in order that others might live. *The recognition of others as subjects* is the first step. Once the hegemony of the subject-object model is broken—that poor people and nature are seen mainly as resources for the benefit of the rich and powerful—the other steps can follow. It becomes increasingly difficult to continue to treat other people or nature as objects once one has acknowledged that one is not the Sole Subject, that something besides oneself truly exists.

V. Our Natural Affection for the Earth

Let us approach this transformation in attitude that can result in changed behavior from a slightly different direction. Economist Herman Daly asks whether we should elect the anthropocentric or the biocentric optimum economic scale.¹¹ Should we expand our production and consumption with only our own benefit in mind, valuing nature only instrumentally? Or should we limit our production and consumption to take into consideration the intrinsic value of other life forms? Which economic scale — the anthropocentric or the biocentric — will give us the abundant life? Western consumer-obsessed culture assumes that the anthropocentric scale is the correct answer. But Christian spirituality and, I would add, the experience of many ordinary people in both the First and Third Worlds, give a different answer. Not only *ought* we to respect other life forms, but most of us *want* to. The Dalai Lama has said on many occasions that human beings have a “natural affection” for the earth, that this affection is not something religion forces on us, but is common, almost innate.¹² We see this in the delight that young children take in collecting bugs, watching a squirrel, making mud pies, touching warm animal fur. This connection deep within us for the earth and its myriad wonderful creatures is something to remember as we think of a new definition of the abundant life. Do we want an abundant life that does not include these others? Even if we could gauge our economics to the anthropocentric scale, do we *want* to? What would life be without lions and tigers and grizzly bears or even bird song, shade trees, and flowers? Some people, many people, already live in places with few of these companions. In *The Geography of Childhood*, psychiatrist Robert Coles gives a moving example of a twelve-year-old Black girl living in a high-rise apartment in Boston who was bussed to a previously all-White school.

I guess I'm doin' all right. I'm studyin', and, like the teacher says, it pays off. A lot of time, though, I wish I could walk out of that school and find a place where there are no Whites, no Black folk, no people of any kind! I mean, a place where I'd be able to sit and get my head together; a place where I could walk and walk, and I'd be walking on grass, not cement, with glass and garbage around; a place where there'd be sky and the sun, and then the moon and all those stars. At night, sometimes, when I am feeling real low, I'll climb up the stairs to our roof, and I'll look at the sky, and I'll say, hello there, you moon and all you babies — stars! I'm

being silly, I know, but up there, I feel I can stop and think about what's happening to me—it's the only place I can, the only place.¹³

Gustav Gutiérrez, expounder of Liberation Theology, has said that the poor have the right to think; they also have the right to a relationship with the natural world. We are not aliens or tourists on this planet; we evolved here and this is our home. It is also home to millions of other species, all of us interrelated and interdependent. Our well-being, the abundant life, must start from recognizing who we are in the scheme of things—that we are kin to all these others and that our happiness (and not just our survival) depends on our recognition of these others as neighbors. The little girl's greeting to the moon and the stars is not silly but an acknowledgment both of reality and of her need for their companionship.

VI. Some Case Studies of the Good Life

The recognition of all others as subjects should take place in the various dimensions of our lives. It should be an implicit assumption in national and international economic policy, causing us to choose the biocentric rather than the anthropocentric option. It should also be a critical factor at the level of local planning. How different might our cities be if this view of abundance edged out the consumer view? A couple of interesting case studies in this regard are Curitiba, Brazil, and Kerala, India, which are relative success stories in incorporating the new vision of the abundant life. (In suggesting these examples I am painfully aware that neither of them is in the affluent West where the new vision of abundance needs to take hold. We who most need to change must look to the South and the East for guidance.) Bill McKibben, in his book *Hope, Human and Wild: True Stories of Living Lightly on the Earth*, speaks of these cities as “models of . . . post-utopia, places that resemble neither our pleasant daydream of a society nor the various nightmares so obvious in the world around us.”¹⁴

Curitiba is a city of a couple million people, not blessed with beautiful beaches or mountains, but measured by its “livability,” 99 percent of its citizens like it. Curitiba was fortunate to have as its mayor a city planner named Jaime Lerner, whose vision and great energy helped to spark widespread citizen concern for the city. That concern, over several decades, has resulted in a place to live where an excellent bus system, rather than cars, transports people; where a series of parks,

cheaply built around small lakes from flood-control dams, has changed the amount of green space from 2 square feet per resident to 150 square feet; where education is available to all on an equal basis; and where people use the city safely at night and children play in the streets. It is a high-density, workable, interesting city where ordinary people with limited incomes live along with nature.

Kerala, in southern India, is a very poor area with one-seventieth the income per person of the United States, but which has 100 percent literacy, where men live only two years less on the average than in the United States, and where the birthrate is eighteen per thousand versus sixteen per thousand in the States. There is no air conditioning, no shopping malls, and few cars, but it is not a depressing place, giving lie to the assumption that only endless economic growth can provide a decent life. Early Marxist influences in Kerala created an atmosphere of sharing; moreover, an anti-caste reformer named Sri Narayana Guru undercut the worst cases of caste discrimination. The high literacy rate has meant that women have felt in charge of their lives, thus lowering the birthrate as well as the incidence of female infanticide. These various influences give Kerala a distinctive flavor of possibility and hope, though none of the factors operative in this place are utopian, impractical, or even especially unusual. Although Kerala's is a low-level economy, it produces a decent life for people, where health, education, and sense of community are priorities. It is also an environmentally light economy, with low levels of energy consumption.

VII. Conclusion

A Christian nature spirituality need not be built on conscience or guilt alone; it can also be built on love. It can be grounded in our natural affection for the earth and the extension to nature of the respect for otherness at the heart of the Great Commandments. Just as loving God and neighbor is the fulfillment of who we truly are — the way we become fully human — so also is our love for the earth. We not only *should* love God, neighbor, and nature, but the good life, the abundant life, depends on us doing so. This suggests a different vision of the abundant life, an alternative to the consumer-oriented view, but not a totally grim one. It does not assume that people are motivated to change only from fear or guilt; rather, it suggests that there is a basis in all of us for loving the earth. Christian spirituality presses this natural affinity in a radical way, insisting that the most oppressed parts of cre-

ation, whether these be other people or other life forms, demand our special attention and care. This new vision of the abundant life will be very difficult to bring about even in small ways (how many Curitiba and Keralas are there?). Like all visions of utopia, including the “kingdom of God” or the eschatological banquet, it is useful mainly as a goad and a goal toward changing concrete situations in whatever ways possible. It suggests a different trajectory, a different possibility, a different imaginative social construction of how we might live. It is at most a glimmer of how things might be different. It does not assume that human beings, including North American elites, will live this way; rather, it describes a radical—and attractive—possibility and encourages all approximations of that vision, such as Curitiba and Kerala as well as treaties and legislation that refuse the objectifying model.

In summary, one contribution that Christianity might make to the conversation on global climate change is to suggest a different basic model for the abundant life, one built not on the subject-object pattern of control and use, but on the subject-subjects model with its recognition of and appreciation for otherness. It is a model that uses as its primary criterion the well-being of the twenty-first century’s representative human being—the Third World woman of color who lives at the juncture of human poverty and ecological deterioration. As we look at her, we Westerners must acknowledge what we cannot see by looking at ourselves: that human beings and nature are faring badly on our planet. Were the First World to begin to introduce this model into its corporate life, we might begin to see some movement toward consumption limitation and sharing of resources. This model is not, I have suggested, esoteric, rare, or limited to Christians. Its basis lies deep within all of us.

I would like to close with an example from my own childhood. My family owned a small cabin on a Cape Cod lake, and from the time I was about eight or nine years old, I was allowed to go alone in a rowboat, with its half-horse-power motor, to the third lake (the one farthest from the cabin) to hunt for painted turtles. I often went early in the morning, which increased my enormous sense of adventure: to go alone to this (to me) remote area to hunt, indeed stalk, turtles was a privilege around which I could scarcely contain my excitement. I spent hours hunkered down in the boat, creeping up, with the help of a canoe paddle, to the sleeping turtles sunning themselves on lily pads. I seldom netted one, but occasionally I succeeded. The real success, however, occurred at another level: the close encounter with a mysteri-

ous and fascinating other species — as I found turtles to be then and still do — gave me a sense of intimate connection with them. My early experiences with this wild other — these reptiles, with their ancient lineage, impressive longevity, ingenious skeleton, and immense difference from my own species — have been the grounds for a conscious link to nature. It is as if turtles opened up a pathway for me into the natural world — giving me a bridge to pass over into that other world. Turtles were then and still are my animal “other,” the one with whom I feel a special connection, a special empathy. Whenever I see the peculiar shape of a turtle — the humped back and stretched-out neck — even just the shadow of it from a distance down a road, I have a visceral reaction: my attention is immediately and totally riveted on it. Peculiar, perhaps, but a witness to the power of that bond with the natural world characterized by curiosity, wonder, and attention that can awaken in a child and continue, albeit in different forms, throughout life.

I believe that the abundant life is linked to “turtles,” to our primal love for the others who inhabit this planet with us. ●

Appendix

The following is a brief theological statement I wrote for the World Council of Churches Consultation on Climate Change and Sustainable Societies/Communities, which was held in November 1996 in Driebergen, the Netherlands. This draft is my contribution as one of three theologians invited to the conference and has no official WCC status. It is addressed to Christians as a possible study guide on Christian faith and climate change.

A Theological Reflection on Climate Change

Who Are We?

Christians have long considered themselves to be made in God’s image, the crown of creation, the creatures most like God. This high calling, however, has not always or even usually meant a heightened

sense of responsibility and appreciation for the rest of creation. Too often it has meant, rather, a sense of entitlement to use nature for human profit or pleasure.

The monstrous effects of climate change, effects brought about by human misuse of nature, are opening our eyes to who we really are. To be made in God's image does not mean that we are God's favorite but rather God's ally, not God's darling but God's partner. Our high calling is not to a place of privilege but to a place of responsibility. The sobering effects of climate change are a wake-up call to Christians to radically reconsider the place of human beings in the scheme of things. No longer can we continue ruining the planet like heedless children, expecting God to clean up after us. *We are adults and the future of the earth is in our hands* — not totally and perhaps not successfully, but more substantially than we previously believed. We now know that what we do matters and knowing this, we cannot pretend we do not know or live as if we do not care.

Climate change not only makes us aware that we are responsible for the earth; it also makes us aware that we love it. The thought of a ruined planet, a planet unable to provide sustenance and joy to our children and grandchildren, makes us feel sad. We also begin to realize our sense of kinship with other life forms and our desire to see them flourish. Loving the earth is preparation for a basic shift in sensibility for Christians: a conversion to the earth. We find that we love the earth because these others are valuable both in themselves and in God's eyes. Christians need a mind-shift, a heart-shift, to the earth and the well-being of all its creatures, human and nonhuman. The God who created the earth with all its wonderful creatures and who became incarnate in one of these creatures calls us to this conversion. The incarnate One does not ask us to love God and despise the earth, but to love God *and* love the earth.

What does this conversion to the earth mean? It can be summed up in two images: household and *kindom*. The "ecumenical" movement can no longer be limited to unification of various church bodies. It must now be seen in its more basic form as the household (*oikos*) of God. "Ecumenical" means "the whole world" or "the inhabited world." It is not limited to Christians or even to human beings, but refers to the entire creation and all its creatures. Thus, conversion to the earth means that Christians should consider the entire earth as the household of God. The traditional African house is built in a circle—a round house as an image of the round earth. The circular house in

which we all live suggests something very important about how we should relate to one another within this household.

We could think of the household not as the kingdom but as the kingdom of God, a household containing all God's creatures. Much of Western as well as Christian thinking has been patterned on a very different model, a dualist one: humans over nature, males over females, Whites over People of Color, Northern countries over Southern ones, Christians over non-Christians. In this model relationship is hierarchical, with one species, gender, color, country, or religion primary and all others inferior. But the circular household of earth gives a different model of relationship: an ecological one. In this model all are profoundly interrelated and interdependent and at the same time radically individualized and diverse. We humans now know that we cannot live a day without plants, so deep is our dependence on them, but we are all, every human being and every plant, different from all the others. We do not have to be the same to be united; in fact, ecological unity is built on interdependent differences.

So, our household, our kingdom, of earth is a vast, complex, interdependent, diverse, wondrous place created by God for the well-being of all its inhabitants. Who are we in this household? We are, first of all, members of the family, kin to all the others who live here. This household is our home, we belong here—we are neither aliens nor tourists. As made in God's image, we have been given special responsibilities for this household, for we are the ones, the only ones, who know its "house rules," the things we must do and not do in order to maintain a well-run home.

What Must We Do?

Quite simply, we must learn to live by the rules in our home, God's household. Above all else, what climate change is telling us is that this household must be a sustainable community at every level, from planetwide economics to family economics. "Economics," from the same word root (*oikos*) as ecumenism and ecology, means "the management of a household." Economics, then, is a central Christian concern for it has to do with how the basic material needs of the household's members are met. Since the household includes all human members as well as all other life forms (the entire kingdom), Christians need to be inclusive in economic considerations. The abundant life that God calls us to can be neither an individual human being's salvation nor the current

consumer version of well-being. Rather, it must be a *shalom* vision for the entire family of God's creatures.

But what, practically speaking, does this mean? It will mean different things for different peoples and creatures. Woven together as we are by bonds of interrelationship and interdependence in this household of earth, we need not fear diversity. We need not seek *one* answer to the question, What must we do? In fact, the insistence on a universal solution is almost always a mask for power (*my* answer, *our* answer). It is often also a way to cover up differing degrees of responsibility for the present crisis—for instance, Western levels of carbon dioxide emissions into the atmosphere. Learning to live by the planet's house rules, by its proper economics, is a matter of induction, of piecing together stories and strategies of survival and flourishing from local communities, bioregions, and citizens' efforts, as well as ecclesiastical initiatives, governmental legislation, and international agreements. The process will not be neat, universal, or simple. Rather, united by a common problem—the threat of climate change to our planet—we Christians, along with all others who want the earth to flourish, should work at various pieces of the planetary agenda.

For example, those people and countries that are responsible for most of the emissions that create climate change must do something different from those people and countries who are the principal recipients of the effects of the emissions. Someone should speak a word of judgment to the elites of both the First and Third Worlds and a call should be made for a radical change in their consumer lifestyle. These people are not loving the earth and its inhabitants; rather, they are casting an arrogant eye on it, perceiving it to be theirs for the taking. They do not accept the intrinsic value either of other people or of other life forms: these others are simply “for” or “against” me and my kind. Christian witness, guided by the economic rules of the household of God, the rules that insist on providing basic needs for all family members, must denounce such outrageous greed. The new vision of who we are—members of God's kingdom—requires us to demand an economics that can sustain the entire community.

What Can We Hope For?

Christian hope has often been individual and tribal: hope for one's own redemption and for one's nearest and dearest. It has also been a *shalom* vision oriented to another world, one inhabited only by Chris-

tians. Our conversion to the earth (who we are) and our calling to work for the well-being of the entire household (what we must do), means that our hope changes as well. We do not hope just for eternal life in another world, but for a transformed life in this world. We hope for the kingdom's well-being.

Dare we hope? The seriousness of climate change, one of several crushing problems facing our planet, combined with the denial of it by most people, is cause for hesitation in answering this question in a positive way. Neither businesses, governments, churches, nor individuals appear to be taking the issue seriously and the few that do are uncertain about what actions to take. Our planet may never again be as healthy as it is now, even given its present deteriorating state. We cannot hope for Eden, for a return to a preindustrialized earth.

But Christianity is not a tragic vision. It does not believe that God is either malevolent toward or indifferent to the world. It believes that God is on the side of life and its flourishing. Christianity believes this because of Jesus Christ, who took our flesh and lived among us, preaching and teaching about love for the outcast, the despised. This Jesus lived a life of such radical identification with the oppressed that he ended up on a cross, as happens as well to his disciples who have done likewise. But death was not the end: Jesus' inclusive love for the vulnerable lives on in his followers and in the church. This, in a nutshell, is the Gospel, the good news. It is why Christians are optimists, why they hope when there appears to be no hope, why they refuse to give up. The cross and the resurrection of the incarnate Lord tell Christians that flesh, matter, earth are *God's* and that God will not let them be killed. The preaching and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth tells Christians that God is especially on the side of the weakest, most oppressed, members of earth's family.

Specifically, what does this mean for us in our time? In light of climate change, it means that God (and therefore Christians) are on the side of those creatures and aspects of earth that are experiencing the greatest deterioration. A symbol of this deterioration is a poor Third World woman of color, for she is a barometer of the health of both humanity and nature. Living as she does at the juncture of the poorest human beings and the most devastated nature, she tells us how both are faring. While the world's elites have the power to direct earth's diminishing resources to their own uses, this woman does not. In her increasing poverty, we see also the increasing poverty of nature. The "poor" in our time are both poor people and poor nature. These, then,

are the special objects of God's inclusive love—and so they should be of ours.

What, then, can we hope for? We can hope, because of the God of Jesus Christ, that the death knell of our planet that is sounding in climate change is not the final word. We *can* hope for this because the incarnate God loves the world; God became *embodied* in and on our earth. And God did not let the body die: the resurrection is a symbol of hope for flesh, for matter, for earth. But who we now know we are—God's ally and partner in maintaining our planet—means that hope involves our work. We are responsible for working with God to bring hope to the world.

Seven times in Genesis 1, God looks at creation and says, "It is good. It is very good." Indeed it is. May the household of God—with our help—remain so.

Notes

1. The main points in this essay are elaborated in my book *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). An earlier version of the essay was published in *Ecumenical Review* 49 (April 1997): 185–93.
2. David Hallman, "Ecumenical Responses to Climate Change: A Summary of the History and Dynamics of Ecumenical Involvement in the Issue of Climate Change," *Ecumenical Review* 49 (April 1997): 131.
3. David Helvarg, "The Greenhouse Spin," *Nation*, 16 December 1996, 24.
4. Leonardo Boff, introduction to *Ecology and Poverty: Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, ed. Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995), xi.
5. *Ibid.*, 74.
6. Pacific Conference of Churches, Majuro, Marshall Islands, 16 November 1994; "Accelerated Climate Change: Signs of Peril, Test of Faith," 2nd ed., World Council of Churches, May 1994, 21.
7. Iris Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good," *Chicago Review* 13 (Autumn 1959): 51.
8. For an exposition of the arrogant eye and the loving eye, see Marilyn Frye, "In and Out of Harm's Way: Arrogance and Love," in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*, ed. Marilyn Frye (Trumansburg, N.Y.: The Crossing Press, 1983), 52–83.
9. *Ibid.*, 67.
10. Nairobi World Council of Churches Assembly, 1975.
11. *Ibid.*, 47.
12. See, for instance, Tenzin Gyatso, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, "A Tibetan Buddhist Perspective on Spirit in Nature," in *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment is a Religious Issue*, ed. Steven C. Rockefeller and John C. Elder (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 109–24.
13. As quoted in Gary Paul Nabhan and Stephen Trimble, *The Geography of Childhood: Why Children Need Wild Places* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), xxi–xxii.

14. Bill McKibben, *Hope, Human and Wild: True Stories of Living Lightly on the Earth* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995), 55.

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