

THE ECOZOIC ERA

by Thomas Berry

As we think about the future form of an integral Earth Community we might begin with the observation that in the sequence of biological periods of Earth development we are presently in the terminal phase of the Cenozoic and the emerging phase of the Ecozoic era. The Cenozoic is the period of biological development that has taken place during these past 65 million years. The Ecozoic is the period when human conduct will be guided by the ideal of an integral earth community, a period when humans will be present upon the Earth in a mutually enhancing manner.

The Cenozoic period is being terminated by a massive extinction of living forms that is taking place on a scale equaled only by the extinctions that took place at the end of the Paleozoic around 220 million years ago and at the end of the Mesozoic some 65 million years ago. The only viable choice before us is to enter into an Ecozoic period, the period of an integral community that will include all the human and non-human components that constitute the planet Earth.

The first principle of the Ecozoic era is recognizing that the Universe is primarily a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects. This is especially true of the planet Earth. Every being has its own place and its own proper role in the functioning of the planet, its own presentation of itself that might be identified as its voice.

Our difficulty is that we have become autistic. We no longer listen to what the earth, its landscape, its atmospheric phenomena and all its living forms, its mountains and valleys, the rain, the wind, and all the flora and fauna of the planet are telling us. Since the Seventeenth Century we have not heard, we have not understood the inner world about us. We have experienced the external phenomena. We have had no entry into the world of interior meaning. We have not heard the voices.

Until we do listen, until we do hear these voices and understand what they are telling us, our lives will continue to be shriveled, our judgment as absurd, as destructive as we can presently observe in what we have done to the soil, the water, the air, and the living forms of this loveliest of planets. We will appreciate or revere the planet if we are to form a viable Earth Community.

To achieve this intimacy with the Earth we need new religious sensitivities. The redemption- oriented religions in their traditional forms have fulfilled a significant part of their historical mission. Cosmologically oriented religion is the way into the future. We need to recognize the story of the universe as we know it through our empirical sciences as our sacred story. From its beginning the universe has had a psychic-spiritual as well as a physical-material dimension.

Earth in a special manner has given expression to this psychic-spiritual dimension of the universe. The human belongs among these forms. It establishes with them a single community. There is no effective spiritual or religious mode of being for the human in isolation from this community. The visible world about us is our primary scripture, the primary manifestation of the divine, and this for human communities throughout the entire planet.

A second principle of the Ecozoic era that might be proposed is the ethical principle that beyond suicide, homicide, and genocide, there are even more violent crimes -- biocide and geocide: biocide, the wanton killing of the life systems of the planet; geocide, the killing of the planet itself in its major forms of expression. Ultimately humans cannot extinguish life on the planet. What humans can do is to severely damage the planet beyond recovery to its former grandeur within any comprehensible period of human historical time. This in some manner deserves the designation of geocide.

We might indicate the third principle of the Ecozoic era by noting that the human is derivative, the Earth is primary. The primary concern of every profession, institute, and activity of the human betrays itself unless it makes this larger earth community its primary referent.

So with Economics, the first concern, the first principle of understanding, must be the economic integrity of the planet. Concern for the Gross Earth Product must be the primary concern, not the Gross Human Product. Only within the ever-renewing cycle of Earth productivity can human productivity be sustained.

So with the healing professions, the primary concern must be to maintain the integral well-being of the planet. Not even with all our medical sciences and technologies can we establish well human beings on a sick planet.

A fourth principle might propose that in the future the Earth will function differently than it has functioned in the past. Throughout the Cenozoic the Earth evolved independently of the human. In the emerging Ecozoic period almost nothing will happen that will not in some manner be related to the human. Not, however, that we will control the inner workings of the planet. We cannot make a blade of grass. But there is liable not to be a blade of grass if it is not accepted, protected, and fostered by the human. We have completely new and comprehensive responsibilities now that we never had before. Ultimately we should be diminishing the domestication of the planet and assisting the wilderness to reactivate itself. A contradiction, perhaps. Yet what is needed is that we accept and foster the wild fertile forces of the planet that are consistently being weakened, unless humans withdraw their terrifying presence and grant to the other members of the Earth Community their rights to habitat and their share of the Earth's benefits.

A fifth principle might propose that any valid Progress must be progress of the entire life community, not progress of the human at the expense of the non-human members of the

community. To designate human plundering of the plant as Progress is an absurdity beyond description.

A sixth principle guiding the future might propose the need for celebration. The universe throughout its vast extent in space and its sequence of transformations in time might be considered a single multiform celebratory event. The very purpose of the planet Earth seems to be to exhibit a culminating celebratory mode of expression, something to justify the emergent galaxies, the supernova explosions wherein the elements were formed, the shaping of the solar system, the emergence of this privileged planet. When we ask what is the meaning of the flight of the birds, their song; what is the meaning of the quiet gliding of fish through the sea; what is the meaning of the evening song of the cicada: we can indeed assign some pragmatic answer, but that would not go to the deeper meaning of the phenomena. This we find under the rubric of celebration.

So with the human, our entry into the Ecozoic period can only come through celebration of the grandeur and loveliness and joy of existence on the planet Earth. Once we begin to celebrate, all things become possible even an Ecozoic era.