What Does It Mean to Believe.....

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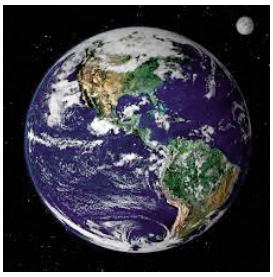
Picture the Earth as seen in familiar photos taken from space. There it spins, a beautiful blue marble, wrapped in swirling white clouds, luminous against the black background of endless space. We humans live here, as do millions of other species on and under the solid land, in the fresh and salty waters, and in the air above our heads. In fact, this is the only place where life exists, as far as we know to date.

From here we can look out and see other places, planets and stars as our ancestors did, and now with amazing new telescopes, we can see ancient galaxies, billions and billions of them. Perhaps some day creatures from Earth will live elsewhere. But for now and always, Earth is our home planet.

The awful, undeniable reality we face today is that Earth is in trouble. Due to human action and inaction, the planet is warming. Severe droughts, wildfires, floods and storms are wreaking havoc. Hundreds if not thousands of species are rapidly becoming extinct.

The resulting damage disrupts the lives of ever more millions of people, among them those who become climate refugees. Efforts to care for the Earth are multiplying, as seen in everything from international agreements to individual lifestyle choices. These efforts, however, face fierce opposition from political and financial forces. And we cannot underplay indifference.

The conviction that one living God created and loves the whole world holds revolutionary potential to motivate care for the Earth. Yet it has not led many Christians to do so in a noticeable way until recently.



Amid this dangerous and complex scene, what can religions bring to the table? Since religious traditions at their best are bearers of wisdom about ultimate meaning and lay out a roadmap for how to live a good life, most of the world's religions have resources that can nurture ecological care. Pope Francis put his finger on this in his 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si': Care for Our Common Home:*

I would like from the outset to show how faith convictions can offer Christians, and some other believers as well, ample motivation to care for nature and for the most vulnerable of their brothers and sisters.... It is good for the world at large when we believers better recognize the ecological commitments which stem from our convictions [No. 64].

In other words, beliefs have consequences and should count for something in the practical order. Christianity, along with other monotheistic faiths, holds dear the belief

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that one living God created and loves the whole world. This conviction holds revolutionary potential to motivate care for the Earth. Yet it has not led many Christians to do so in a noticeable way until recently.

An intriguing story about the 19th-century naturalist John Muir highlights the problem. One day, when Muir was hiking in the Yosemite wilderness, he came upon a dead bear and stopped to reflect on this creature's dignity. Here was an animal with warm blood and a heart that pumped like ours, one who was glad to feel the warm sun on his fur and for whom a good day was finding a bush filled with berries. Later Muir wrote a bitter entry in his journal criticizing the religious folk he knew who made no room in their faith for such noble creatures. They think they are the only ones with souls, he complained, the only ones for whom heaven is reserved. To the contrary, he wrote, "God's charity is broad enough for bears."

Is it? Are black bears, panda bears, polar bears, golden bears loved by the Creator to the extent that in their suffering and death they are affected by God's redeeming power? If so, where does that place us humans in the divine scheme of things? Taking the side of the bears, I would argue that we humans need to rethink our relationship with nature. We need to change from thinking we are "masters of the universe" to realizing we are kin with bears and all other living beings in a beloved community of creation.

I will explore this issue in three points: first, the reality of the community of creation; second, a powerful obstacle to grasping that we are part of it; and third, remedies to remove the obstacle. I offer these probes into an ecological theology not with the expectation that all will necessarily agree, but in the hope these thoughts will stimulate our thinking about the sacred importance of the natural world, to practical and critical effect.

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Our Shared Inheritance

As life has evolved on Earth, it has taken shape in millions of species of dazzling variety— including the human species—all interacting with the land, water and air of different ecosystems. As the nature writer Annie Dillard says, "The creator loves pizzazz."

The process of evolution can explain how species took shape in the course of time. But the fact that they exist at all does not explain itself. From ancient times people facing the vulnerability, fierceness and wonder of life have had the sense that there is more here than meets the eye. As biblical faith sees it, the world's existence is due to the gift of an infinitely generous creator. This incomprehensible mystery—whom people call God—is sheer, exuberant aliveness, an overflowing wellspring of being without origin, limitation or end. In creating the world, the living God freely gives a share in that aliveness to others who are not divine. And they all receive it with creaturely flair.

Ordinarily, mention of God creating the world takes our minds back to the origin of things, as in the Book of Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning." People often assume, while never explicitly saying so, that from this initial spark everything rolls along on its own. It is almost as though the Creator's rest on the seventh day extends into a long retirement. What gets overlooked, in this shortsighted view, is the truth that creation is ongoing. The living God continuously creates.

Without this largesse, there would be no world at all. Everything would collapse into unimaginable "no-thing." One striking metaphor from the British philosopher Herbert McCabe, O.P., puts it this way: The Creator "makes all things and keeps them in existence from moment to moment, not like a sculptor who makes a statue and leaves it alone, but like a singer who keeps her song in existence at all times." Creation as a continuous, in-person, live performance!

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In creating the world, the living God freely gives a share in that aliveness to others who are not divine. And they all receive it with creaturely flair.Trying to understand this, the 13th-century theologian Thomas Aquinas wrote words that still resonate:

God is in all things; not, indeed, as part of their essence...but as an agent is present to that upon which it works.... Now since the essence of God is to exist, created being must be the proper effect of God's action, as to ignite is the proper effect of fire. Now God causes this effect in things not only when they first begin to be, but as long as they are preserved in being, as the sun causes light in the air as long as the air remains illuminated. Therefore as long as a thing has being, God must be present to it...and innermostly.

The way a flame sets other things on fire, the Creator continuously sparks all things into being. The way the sun makes the air bright, the Creator shines on the world and brings all its creatures into their own existence. This is the basic meaning of creation. An ongoing, life-giving relationship between the Creator and creature marks the deepest identity of the world.

In the biblical view, why this should happen at all is due to one reason: love. The Book of Wisdom figures it this way: "For you love all things that exist, and detest none of the things that you have made, for you would not have fashioned anything if you had hated it" (Wis 11:24-25). Pope Francis draws on this idea in "Laudato Si'" when he writes that creation is a gift "in which every creature has its own value and significance" (No. 76). "Even the fleeting life of the least of beings is the object of God's love, and in its few seconds of existence, God enfolds it with affection" (No. 77), he continues. Commentators note that here Francis may well have had mayflies in mind. These little insects live for only a few hours after they hatch, during which they must find a mate and lay eggs, and then they die. So ephemeral. But enfolded with affection; as are we all.

The continuous, creating presence of the living God receives another coloration when we realize that the world is not finished. For 13.8 billion years the universe has been unfolding with galaxies and their stars forming, merging, breaking apart, shaping something new. On our own planet, evolution keeps bringing forth "endless forms most beautiful," to use Darwin's lovely phrase. Nature is seeded with promise, pregnant with surprise. But the cost is high. The history of life is a history of pain and suffering. Death is deeply structured into the creative advance of life which arises in the midst of perpetual perishing.In creating the world, God is present here and now to each creature, loving each into existence and future.

If we ask where God is in the midst of this trouble, bedrock biblical faith answers "here," in solidarity with creatures crushed by pain and death. The Creator spirit is present amid suffering with the intent to heal, redeem and liberate. The Apostle Paul wrote that while all creation is groaning like a woman in labor, one day "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom 8:21). In creating the world, God is present here and now to each creature, loving each into existence and promising its future. When trouble comes, God does not abandon the beloved creature. As the Australian theologian Denis Edwards mused in flowing language in a 2006 essay:

The Creator Spirit is with creatures in their finitude, death and incompletion, holding each in redemptive love, and is in some way already drawing each into an unforeseeable eschatological future.... The Spirit is with each creature now, with every wild predator and prey and with every dying creature, as midwife to the unimaginable birth in which all things will be made new. Things fall apart. There is hope for the future. "I will be with you" is the proper name of the Creator of Heaven and Earth.

Hence, from a God's-eye point of view, human beings do not stand alone as the end-all and be-all of the world. Rather, together with all other creatures, they form one beloved community of creation. We too receive our life as a gift from the overflowing love of God and exist in reliance on that gift, with hope that this same God will be faithful even in our death. In this light, precisely as creatures, we humans have more in common

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with other species than what separates us. As creatures we are kin with the bear, the squid, the raven and the bugs. In the lovely words of "Laudato Si'," "we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures but joined in one splendid universal communion" (No. 220).

The landscape of our imagination expands when we realize that human connection to nature is so deep that we can no longer define our identity without including the great sweep of cosmic history and our shared genetic inheritance with other organisms in the evolutionary history of life.

It is one of the blessings of our age that scientific study reaches a similar conclusion by its own distinctive methods. We humans are an intrinsic part of the evolutionary network of life on this planet, which in turn is a part of the solar system, which itself formed out of the debris of older exploding stars in the Milky Way, which formed sometime after the flaring forth of the Big Bang. The British scientist Arthur Peacocke captures our physical relatedness in a striking example. Why is our blood red like the blood of other mammals? Because of iron. "Every atom of iron in our blood would not be there had it not escaped from the explosion of a red supergiant billions of years ago, and then condensed to form the iron in the crust of the earth from which we have emerged."

The landscape of our imagination expands when we realize that human connection to nature is so deep that we can no longer define our identity without including the great sweep of cosmic history and our shared genetic inheritance with other organisms in the evolutionary history of life. There is but one community of life on Earth. In scientific terms, there is one biosphere. In theological terms, there is one community of creation. Everything is connected to everything else, and we all flourish and wither together.

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Obstacles

There are many reasons why we humans have lost this sense of communion with our kin. One is our undoubted abilities of intellect and will. We have the capacity to think symbolically and to express thoughts in verbal language. We ask questions. We invent things. We comfort and heal. We rape and kill. We have the capacity for the most profound self-giving love as well as the capacity for self-delusion and for acts of barbaric evil.

Given these abilities, it has become common in religious and secular thought of the modern era to think of human beings as standing apart from the natural world rather than being an interwoven part of it. Here I will zero in on one factor for separation that has been particularly toxic in the realm of theology: the "hierarchy of being." The back story is interesting.

When early Christianity spread around the Roman empire, it came into contact with a version of Greek philosophy which taught that the world is composed of two elements: matter and spirit, or body and soul/mind. Since divinity is pure spirit, philosophers reasoned that the more spirit a being possesses, the more godlike it is, and the closer to the divine; the more matter, the further away. Philosophy used this schema to rank the inhabitants of the world according to a hierarchy of being.

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At the bottom was non-living material, like rocks; higher up were plants (they are alive and germinate seeds), then animals (they have locomotion). Highest on Earth were humans (with rational soul and body); even higher were angels (pure spirits with no body). From the pebble to the peach, to the poodle to the person, to the principalities and powers! Instead of a circle of kinship, this model structures the world as a pyramid with humans at the pinnacle of earthly creation.

Theology drew on this framework to teach that humans—with our superior spirit—rightly rule over plants and animals. In technical terms, they had instrumental rather than intrinsic value "in God's eyes" (note these words). Consequently, at the end of the world, plants and animals will disappear. Since their purpose is to provide for our needs, once human life on Earth is over—when we no longer need them for food, clothing, shelter, muscle power—their goal will have been fulfilled. They will cease to exist.

I find it daunting to realize how deeply the hierarchy of being and its anthropology of the elite white male has made its way into the DNA of Christian thought and spirituality.

Today, feminist thinkers complexify this picture by noting how this hierarchy was turned inward, even on the human race itself. It credited men with having more spirit than women. Men, possessed of reason and ability to act, are more like deity than women, identified with emotion and their changing bodies that bleed and bring forth life, like Mother Earth itself. Hence women are by nature subordinate to men, who by virtue of their superior spirit are equipped to rule; a rule that, I would note, can turn violent and exploitative with little compunction.

This same hierarchy of being turned even more vicious in the 15th and 16th centuries, when Europeans began their vigorous exploration of other lands. Thinkers in that aggressive, entrepreneurial culture took human superiority to mean that explorers had the right to exploit the minerals, forests and animals in other lands for profit. Even more malicious was the support this framework gave to white European men's idea of their own supremacy when they encountered African and Indigenous peoples.

By assigning to people of color souls of lesser quality with inferior intelligence, by identifying them more with bodiliness, by seeing them closer to animals than to humans, Europeans thought they had the right to conquer, transport and enslave millions of human beings for profit. Church teaching, given its commitment to the hierarchy of being, had little to offer by way of resistance to the devastating disruption of whole communities and individual lives. And the terrible, racist results of slavery continue to this day.

I find it daunting to realize how deeply the hierarchy of being and its anthropology of the elite white male has made its way into the DNA of Christian thought and spirituality. Not only has it prevented equality and justice in the human community; but with its conviction that humans are rulers over nature, it also opened the door to centuries of unbridled exploitation of the natural world.

The lack of concern on the part of many Christian people for the devastation of the Earth in our own day can be traced in part to the ongoing influence of this idea. If other creatures are less valuable in God's eyes, why should we bother?

In the arena of faith, I think one of the best antidotes to human hubris is a robust creation theology.

Antidotes

There is a thought experiment that may begin to introduce sobriety to minds drunk on human supremacy. It has to do with trees. In the hierarchy of being, humans rank above trees. When humans breathe, we inhale oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide. In the presence of the sun, trees do the opposite. They take in carbon dioxide and release oxygen. Their photosynthesis is largely responsible for producing the oxygen content of the Earth's atmosphere. Take away trees, and humans would suffo-

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cate. Take away humans, and trees would do just fine; probably better, for we would not be cutting them down. Who needs who more? Which is more valuable? By what criterion?

In the arena of faith, I think one of the best antidotes to human hubris is a robust creation theology. The radical language of conversion comes into play here. It is being used by theologians, popes and spiritual writers to emphasize the magnitude of the challenge. We need to turn, change our hearts, reset our minds, strike out in a new direction and—in a way that might sound strange to religious ears—be converted to the Earth as one beloved community of creation.

Calling for this conversion and drawing on a robust creation theology, "Laudato Si'" criticizes the humans-at-the-pinnacle view as "inadequate" and frankly "wrong." Pope Francis recognizes that he is contributing something new to Catholic teaching by insisting that "we are called to recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God's eyes" (No. 69). He continues forthrightly: "In our time the Church does not simply state that other creatures are subordinate to the good of human beings, as if they had no worth in themselves and can be treated as we wish." Rather, "They have an intrinsic value in God's eyes independent of their usefulness to us" (No. 140).

Note the very deliberate language that challenges the hierarchy of being. And why? Because God loves them, even the little mayflies. This leads to a radical claim: "[T]he final purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us. Rather, all creatures are moving forward, with us and through us, towards a common point of arrival, which is God" (No. 83).

Almost with agony, Laudato Si applies this view of the community of creation to the ongoing catastrophe of the extinction of species. When a species goes extinct, it disappears forever. Given that evolution requires passing on genes from one generation to the next, it will never come back. While death means the end of life for the individual, extinction means the death of birth itself for a species and damage to all the other creatures in the ecosystem with which it is interrelated. In view of the community of creation, Laudato Si declares, "God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the soil drying out into desert almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement" (No. 89).

What an extraordinary idea! The loss of a species should strike us as if our own body had been wounded, or as if we ourselves had lost a limb.

In clear language, Francis rolls the community of creation all the way to the ultimate future. "At the end, we will find ourselves face to face with the infinite beauty of God." He is describing heaven, which is of course indescribable. Enfolded with affection, we humans will not find ourselves alone, for the whole universe will also be present, "which with us will share in unending plenitude." Indeed, "eternal life will be a shared experience of wonder, in which each creature, resplendently transfigured, will take its rightful place" (No. 243). Will I see my dog in heaven? Here is the answer. We cannot imagine this, but Francis is drawing out the logic of belief in God the Creator.

Some years ago, while teaching in South Africa, I gave a public lecture on this very biblical idea that all creation will be redeemed. I had just visited the great Kruger National Park and been deeply moved by seeing Africa's marvelous animals roam-

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ing in the wild, so I departed from my prepared text to say that lions, hippos, giraffes, impala, wildebeest, storks—the whole lot—had a blessed future in store. The local Catholic newspaper disagreed. It ran an article critical of my talk under the headline "Salvation Even for Elephants?"

Whyever not? The Creator is not a throwaway God. We humans do not stand alone as subjects of divine love. In the community of creation we all share the core identity of being beloved creatures. For all our human difference as a species, this shared identity makes us kin with the land, sea and sky, and with the skunks, seagulls, salmon, spiders and sequoias. One day all of us creatures will be at home in the beauty of God, just as now in time our common home is the Earth. As a deliberate religious teaching, this conviction has profound ethical implications.

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Expanding the Repertoire of our Love

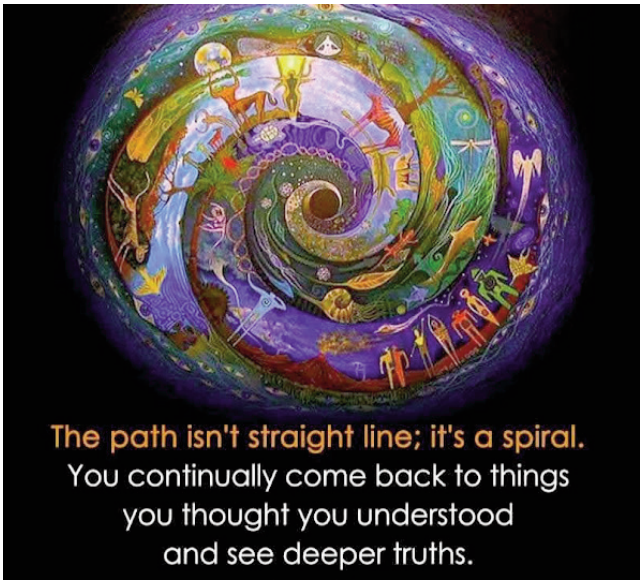
Our times urgently require that we humans develop an ecological sense of ourselves in tune with belief in an ecological God. In light of our common creator we need to expand our sense of identity to include relationship with other creatures, the land, waters and air, all creation itself. Once we have truly appreciated the life of "the other," we arrive at a new starting point for decision-making.

Then we can begin to change some of the deep-seated behaviors that are driving environmental destruction as well as our world's galloping poverty, the deity of the market and our cultural despair. Humbled and delighted by the life around us, we can begin to hear the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor and step up to protect our kin.

James Michener, in a story told in his novel The Source, makes the point in its own way. As he tells it, in pre-biblical days people living in a Canaanite village in the Middle East worshiped a god who demanded human sacrifice, including the lives of first-born sons, in order to ensure the ongoing fertility of crops. A young woman named Timna who had recently given birth loved her baby son fiercely and could not accept that he had to die. She pleaded desperately with her husband, protested and argued vigorously, to no avail. On a given day, amid great public ceremony, her husband walked to the altar and handed the infant over to the priests, who tumbled the little bundle into the flames. Months later, still consumed with grief, Timna attended another community ceremony. "And while others celebrated she walked slowly homeward, seeing life in a new and painful clarity: with different gods her husband Urbaal would have been a different man."

With different gods her husband would be a different man. The spiritual wisdom in this fictional woman's insight is profound.

Imagine a continuous, public understanding of the living God as passionate creator, lover and redeemer of the Earth and all its creatures—human beings among them. Imagine that people of faith pray, preach, teach, repent, lament, celebrate, praise and act responsibly so as to do justice to the heart of the living God who pours out love on all human beings as well as on the soil, the waters and the air, and every little bird that falls to the ground, as Jesus said.



E. E. Cummings (American, 1894–1962), *Chocorua Landscape*. Watercolor, 12 × 18 in.

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday;this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings:and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

This poem was originally published in Xaipe[1] *(New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), reissued in 2004 by Liveright, an imprint of W.W. Norton & Company.*