



# Contribution of Christianity to Sustainability

Leonardo Boff

Leonardo Boff (Brazil) is one of the founders of liberation theology and was for many years Professor of Systematic and Ecumenical Theology at the Franciscan Institute of Petropolis, in Rio de Janeiro. Later he was a Professor of Ethics and Philosophy of Religion at the State University of Rio de Janeiro. He is the author of more than sixty books in various areas of philosophy, theology, and ecology. Currently, he follows grassroots organizations and speaks at conferences and courses on spirituality, ecology, ethics, and ecumenical theology in Brazil and abroad. He is an Earth Charter Commissioner.

We have reached a point in the process of degradation of our ecosystems and the planet Earth that the physiochemical and ecological basis of life is threatened, as is stipulated in the Earth Charter Preamble. If a 4 degrees Celsius abrupt warming occurs - as many scientists have predicted may happen because of the increase of methane in the atmosphere and the thawing of the permafrost - life as we know it, including human life, will be in serious danger.

Facing the possibility of this global catastrophe for both humans and our planet, all of us – both individually and collectively – have to make our own specific contribution – our knowledge, our institutions, our religions and our churches. What can Christianity offer? I can see some relevant points.

## 1. God's good creation

In the first place, we must live out a cosmic spirituality of creation. The Christian faith talks more about creation than nature. Creation means that at all times God is saying, fiat, "create". Creation is not a matter of the past; it is occurring every moment in the present. If God were not permanently sustaining all beings in their existence, they would return to the nothing from which they came. If beings are

born from God's loving word, it means that we must embrace and respect them as real sacraments which speak of the love and power of God. They are visible signs of God's action all over the world. We can find God in everything, and in doing so, live out a cosmic spirituality.

## 2. God's presence within creation

Secondly, the human being was created to be a creator. This is to say that humans have the mission of prolonging the creative act of God. God wanted a world that was evolving and imperfect so that humans, with their intelligence, creativity and work, would perfect it. Therefore, the world belongs to God, but simultaneously also belongs to humans. Our actions in nature and our technology are instruments by which we are humanizing the world and collaborating with the cosmogenic, biogenic and anthropogenic process. Human beings were created as creators. Thus, we are the copilots of the process of evolution at the human and terrestrial levels. Unfortunately, science with consciousness has not always been practiced. Most of the time it is at the service of the market, rather than life. Christian faith is ecocentric and biocentric: first life and the forms of life, then human commodities.

### 3. Cosmic Christ in evolution

Third, the world was touched by the Son of God, who became a man in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, a Mediterranean carpenter and peasant. This man must be seen from inside the process of evolution. The elements that are part of his and our reality – carbon, iron, silicon, and others - were forged at the core of great red stars. They exploded and threw these elements in all directions, from which the galaxies, the stars, the Earth, and all of us were formed. Jesus' life and consciousness burst forth from within this evolutionary process, in an advanced moment for the complexity of the energy, information and matter in evolution. The most ancestral archetypes of humanity - the characteristics of his Jewish people - are present in him. Jesus has cosmic, biological, anthropological and Jewish roots.

All of these, at the time of the Incarnation, began to belong to the Son of God, who took them on. Through that all the elements of the universe became involved in the Incarnation and in a deification process. There is an element of the Cosmic Christ in the universe. As a result, we must treat all beings with utmost respect. They are sacred, they have Christ's design, and they have been, in some way, deified. How can we mistreat them? To do so is to hurt the Son of God.

Because of the Resurrection, Jesus gained cosmic dimensions. Resurrection is not the reanimation of a corpse but much more: it is the emergence of the new man that has reached the end of the evolutionary process. Resurrection is a revolution within evolution. With the Resurrection, creation reached its end, to the extent that He surpassed time and space limits and lives in fullness within the whole universe, in a way that had already been anticipated. According to a saying from the 50s CE, prior to the Gospels, Jesus said: "The world was born from me and returns to me. I lifted the stone and I am under it, I cut the firewood and I am inside

it, because I will be with you every day until the end of the world." Here is the cosmic presence of the Resurrection in the world's matter. Thus, embracing the world, we are embracing God, his Son Jesus, who has been made part of the universe and our brother.

### 4. The Spirit is the universal Energy in the world

In the fourth place is the presence of the Spiritus Creator, the Holy Spirit within creation. He floated over the original chaos and from there took out all beings. He is the divine Energy who gives life, movement, beauty and meaning to all creation. He was and is always present in the creation, converting chaos into new order, with new relational networks which connect and reconnect everyone emerging from the complexity. Where there is love, solidarity, compassion, forgiveness, creation - there you can identify the presence of the Spirit. He arrives before the missionary because he always helps people in becoming open to the Mystery, to the God of a thousand names. He drives the whole evolutionary process toward a good end. This is why the Christian faith favors seeing, in other people, different cultures, and the religions of the world, the presence of the Spirit's energies: grace, goodness, dignity and care for everything that exists and lives.

An ancient proverb from the mystic Eastern Church says: "The Spirit sleeps in the stone, dreams in the flower, feels in the animal and knows that he feels in the man". Here the cosmic presence of the Spirit can be seen. This universal vision of the Spirit implies treating each being with the utmost respect, especially living and human beings, because they are special carriers of the energies of the Spirit. If a human being learns to respect even the smallest being of creation, no one will have to teach him how to love because he is already living it concretely.

## 5. Transparency and panentheism

In the fifth place, there is a rich ecological perspective which is transparency. Christian faith, due to God's incarnation into human reality, surpasses the dual vision inherited by the Greek culture between transcendence and immanence as opposed realities. We Christians talk about transparency. Transparency is the presence of transcendence within immanence, making immanence transparent. As Jesus said: "The one who sees me, sees the Father". In the concrete reality of Jesus we discover the presence of the Father. Jesus made himself transparent in the presence of the Father, so that people could see Him through Jesus. This is transparency, a characteristic of each being of the universe that takes us to the Source of every Being, to God.

Theology also uses another expression to explain this mutual presence of creature and Creator. It talks about panentheism. Panentheism means that all things are in God and God is in all things. There is no insuperable abyss. There is a mutual presence of one inside the other, each one preserving their own identity, God remaining God and the creature continuing as creature. But there is communion and interlacement between them. We should not confuse panentheism with pantheism. In pantheism, there is no difference between creature and Creator: everything is God - the rocks, the water, the animals and the human beings - which leads to contradictions. In panentheism, differences are preserved, but communion bonds are emphasized.

## 6. God is the communion of people and relations

Finally, Christians have their own way of conceiving God. God is a Trinity of Persons. We are not talking about three Gods, because God does not multiply. It is about understanding God as a set of relationships between several persons in such a deep and intimate way that they make one sole God. Ultimately, what

is meant is that God is not solitude but Communion, a Communion of three unique persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. As we know from mathematics, unique is not a number but a singularity. Therefore, the three unique persons are different in order to allow for communion among them, the love that connects them. This perspective is directly ecological because, from quantum physics, we know that everything is relationship and that nothing exists outside relationships. The universe and all things are created as the image of God - Trinity; this is to say that the universe is a relationship just as God-Trinity is. The universe is more than just the sum of all beings. It is a set of relational networks that have intertwined, forming the complex and unique immensity of the universe.

This leads us to understand ourselves within a complex and loving network of relationships, helping one another to continue existing and evolving.

## 7. The mission of human beings in creation

There is an affirmation that comes from Genesis 2 in which it is mentioned that the mission of human beings in the Garden of Eden - that is to say, on Earth - is "to care and protect". "To care" is to have a loving and non-destructive relationship with creation. "To protect" is equivalent to guaranteeing the sustainability of all beings, in the sense of keeping them alive, allowing them to reproduce and to evolve.

This vision is emphasized in the teachings of the Church, highlighting that we are responsible for the inheritance received from God. This means carrying an attitude of respect and of a relationship which is not exclusively utilitarian toward nature, but is respectful in recognizing the intrinsic value of each being. Ultimately, we all come from the heart of God and we must treat each other as brothers and sisters, with the mysticism lived by Saint Francis of Assisi, patron saint of ecology, as our example.

At present, many Christians and churches have embraced the Earth Charter principles because they see in it, in a secular way, the biblical perspective of responsibility toward Mother Earth and social justice that is linked to ecological justice. In many base communities (in Brazil alone, there are approximately 100,000), the decision has been made to deepen into sustainability education which implies a frugal and supportive use of all nature's goods and services, avoiding as much as possible the use of pesticides, encouraging family organic agriculture and promoting the utilization of all residues as ways of generating energy. They have even conceived the ecclesial base communities as ecological base communities.

Internalizing these visions is the task of religious education, whether it be in catechesis or in preaching. Increasingly this education is including the ecological dimension, with care and love for all creation because it carries the great Mystery that lives in the Universe, in each being and in our hearts. Creation was thought to be the body of Trinity and was not to be destroyed. This is why Christians have the unwavering hope that the present situation is not a fatal tragedy, but a crisis for a type of civilization that has to give space to another, a civilization with a greater capacity for caring for Mother Earth and for guaranteeing to all of us the conditions for life and its sustainability. We must be the actors in this new story of the Earth and Humanity: the planetary phase. Christians are called to contribute to make this possible from their symbolic, spiritual and doctrinal capital, together with other religions and spiritual paths.