



# TOWARDS AN ECUMENICAL AND ECOLOGICAL SPIRITUALITY:

*The Faith in a More Biblical  
Understanding of Salvation that  
Calls Us to Concrete Actions*

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We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

(Romans 8:22-23 - New Revised Standard Version - NRSV)

The theological and pastoral reflections on ecological spirituality have been highlighted in different environments, both in the ecclesial space, in the academic, as well as in the context of interreligious dialogue. For my part, as a Christian theologian, but with a strong interfaith concern, I have sought to analyze them in different ways. Thus I try to emphasize their Biblical foundations, the spiritual dimensions generated in the encounter of different religions and the challenges of community life in a world marked by depersonalization, exacerbated individualism, and by exclusionary, violent and conflictive logics, with concrete implications for the poor people and families. Here I want to approach this issue from the perspective of a spirituality that emerges from the creation and recreation of life and is committed to it. Therefore it goes beyond the personal dimension and aims at a cosmic one. It also springs from history and is committed to it, thus it is neither escapist nor individualist, but relates to life in all its human, communal and social breadth. Such spirituality assumes a wide view of salvation and brings into our mind the Judeo-Christian Biblical tradition symbolized in the beautiful image of the shepherd that amidst the dangers of life saves the wounded sheep in a concrete way.

To speak about salvation is an act that intensely mobilizes all human beings, regardless of creed, culture or political and philosophical beliefs. It is something decisive, fundamental in human existence that raises questions and expectations to us all. In the case of the theological reflection, the subject of salvation represents a watershed. The understanding of the

salvation issue demarcates the other theological points, especially the practical and pastoral. Attitudes, values and practices of the individuals and groups will vary considerably depending on their view of salvation. That is why the question is so important in the theological reflections on ecological spirituality.

Within the Christian churches, there are at least two quite common misunderstandings about salvation, both of them without biblical support. The first is the conception of a *mere and utterly individualistic salvation*. The second is that salvation has to do exclusively with another world.

Historically, preaching and Christian education in the context of the evangelical churches in Brazil—but also in the Catholic context—repeated so abusively that salvation is an individual issue that people ended up believing it to be so. Such perspective reinforces the metaphysical interpretations of the salvation issue and raises barriers for a wider understanding of it, with direct consequences in the field of interreligious spirituality.

## What does Jesus teach about our care for the world?

This picture is what seems to describe the reality of Christian churches today. To reverse it, aiming at a substantially more biblical theological understanding of salvation, various efforts need to be made.

In the Latin American context it is prominent the eco-theological proposal of Leonardo Boff. It does not deal with one or another specific aspect of life but proclaims the need of a reinvention of the way of living in the world. It is a call to all humanity, including the varied secular and sacred experiences, aiming at a spiritual awakening for justice and human survival, in the face of the crisis being generated by the current threat of ecocide.

In the book *O Tao da Libertação: explorando a ecologia da transformação* (*The Tao of Liberation: Exploring the Ecology of Transformation*), written by the theologian with Mark Hathaway and Fritjof Capra, we see the intimate relationship between cosmology and spirituality. Cosmology leads us to the questions of the origin, evolution, destiny, and purpose of the humans and

of the universe. Thus we question ourselves about the place of the human being in the great scheme of life, including the “relationship with the Source of everything or God”. Spirituality is the concrete way of incorporating cosmology in the human life. How can we discover the path and the personal or communal meaning of life within a perspective of cosmic evolution?

Such perspective of spirituality is not restricted to religion, even if it has an intimate relationship with it. Spirituality has to do with the whole. In the case of human life, there is a holy unity grounded in a dynamic and interconnected coexistence of matter, energy, and spirit; hence, the refutation of dichotomous ideas, especially between body and soul, matter and spirit, natural sciences and social and human sciences. The fragmented view that separates body and soul is a reductionist one and does not explore all richness and complexity of life. It can even value—by means of introspective attitudes of internalization, silence and seclusion—a posture of relativization of human activism. However, for not being carried out holistically, these can be turned into a way of going through certain moments in life searching for peace and tranquility, which are needed, of course, but this kind of spirituality will not be a “way of being”, such as it would be expected from a holistic one.

## Spirituality Has to Do with the Whole

Our presupposition is that the human being is a whole, with distinct dimensions totally intertwined. It is also complex, in the sense that it possesses dynamic dimensions which converge into a coherent reality. These dimensions are exteriority, interiority and profoundness.

The *exteriority* of the human being is linked to its corporeity, but not as something “dead.” It is the result from a wide scope of dynamic and interactive relationships. Among these are the ones established with the cosmos, the nature, history and society, and other human beings. Among them also are those relationships with the elements and energies that boost life, such as the air, water, clothing, and food, which are followed by a long and varied list. Such relations generate feelings, intelligences, loves, and many kinds of reactions. Even though the body reveals the human exteriority,

it lives in a complexity of interconnected relations that are also interiorized; hence the preference for the expression an embodied being instead of *a being with a body*. In other words: *we are a body* and not *we have a body*. As it was said, we understand the bodies as integrated into the ample relations that surround them. In this sense, we can ask ourselves about land use, the integration with nature and other environmental issues. In the case of Brazil—but also of other parts of the world—our bodies are incorporated into the Amazon forest. If it is destroyed life in the planet is threatened.

**A biblical view applied to energy use today, leads us to think that because of fossil fuel consumption and climate change, we live a process that affects our existence, making it “crucified.”**

The dimension of *interiority* is linked to the psychological and mental universe. It is also an equally complex universe, characterized by impulses, desires, passions, images, and ancestral archetypes. The human mind is the totality of the human being and not just a part of what he has, because it reflects what is inside him and captures all the resonances and interactions of the outside world that reach him and penetrate him. Desires are the most basic structures of the human psyche. They rule life and direct the human being to conquer. As he goes after the desire, which is unlimited, the human being aims to reach everything and the whole. The totality of Being is his purpose. However, human finitude does not allow us that totality and we suffer the temptation of identifying the manifestations of the whole, that is, of God, with God himself. This is to confound the Absolute with the relative, the unlimited with the finite. Hence the need of guiding our desires not only toward our personal and objective satisfaction, which frequently generates frustration and violence, but toward that which cannot be negotiable or transferable in the journeys of human life: the Infinite, the Source of reality, God.

The human being also has a dimension of profoundness. It is that possibility of going beyond human limitations, the mere appearances, sensibilities, perceptions, and understandings. It is the power of perceiving what is beyond the events and things, of being able to discover their foundation and depth, of finding that toward which they lead us or identifying what they point to or symbolize for us. Every situation we live—and with it all material, historical and emotional mediations—evokes memories, images and symbols that nourish the human interiority. They are sacraments of something much greater and wider. This movement promotes a consciousness state by means of which we can perceive the whole and how we integrate ourselves in it. “To perceive the *profoundness* of the world, of all things and of ourselves constitutes that which we call *spirit*. This is not a part of the human being. It is that moment of consciousness by which we experience the meaning and value of things.”<sup>1</sup> This vision enables the human being to experience a singularity. As he goes out to meet his profoundness he encounters himself, with all his circumstances, whether in interpersonal, social and historical relations, whether in relations with nature and the cosmos, and the great Other, God, foundation and center of life. Such profoundness represents a spiritual human possibility, namely spirituality. This is not a monopoly of any religion, culture or thinking, but can be found in different people, groups and stages of life. It aims toward the cozy love of God and opens itself to it, looking for integration with the whole.

Therefore, spirituality expresses itself in the practical and concrete aspects of the political and social life. Here are prominent the processes for the defense of life, social and economical justice, human and earth rights, citizenship and the dignity of the poor. Ecological spirituality creates spaces of social consciousness, alterity, life in coexistence and cordiality, humanization and cosmic integration. It is the empowerment of life, not only the human but life in all the diverse forms it manifests itself. In the case of Brazil, there are many social initiatives and projects from the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra—MST (Landless Workers Movement) and

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1 Leonardo Boff, Marc Hathaway, and Fritjof Capra, *O Tao da Libertação: explorando a ecologia da transformação* (Petrópolis, RJ:Vozes, 2012), 426.

similar social movements that promote communal production and dialogue—not without conflicts—with other social sectors on the preservation of natural resources and forms of land occupation.

This spiritual perspective can be seen as indispensable for the future of humanity and of the Earth. It is sensibility toward others and cooperation and respect in relation to human life and nature. It is a perception of the natural world—both material and human—as living sources of energy and a call to communion with them, in a communal and ecological spirituality. This is vital for the survival of the biosphere.

### **The Contribution of Christian Faith to Ecospirituality**

It is important to analyze the relationship between ecology, spirituality and the Christian tradition for different reasons.

The first one is related to a more critical and negative dimension. This is derived from the fact that Christianity has in its historical conditions, especially in its European roots, a connection with colonial exploitation processes and more recently with the destructive processes of the global corporative capitalism. It is a self-criticism of Christianity for being linked to the pathological and dysfunctional cultures that generated the industrial plunder and consumerism. This raises another reason, of biblical and theological background, that is the question not so much about Christianity, but about the Christian faith, if it is possible to make such a distinction: What does Jesus teach about our care for the world? What does the biblical view offer as a contribution for the salvation of the planet? Our understanding is that a theological interpretation of this biblical view, if applied to the consideration of energy use today, would lead us to think that because of the fossil fuels consumption and of the climate change, we live a process that affects our existence, making it “crucified.” Humanity is on its way to Calvary. The resurrection will arise, however, in the new forms of environmental protection and energy use, especially from renewable sources. Maybe we might say that the wide range of environmental struggles underway in Brazil are making us live on “the way to Emmaus.” The Amazon is this way.

**It is important to reinforce all existing initiatives in various social movements and non-governmental organizations that defend the adoption of energy production using the renewable processes, especially wind power.**

That is why we affirm that the Biblical presupposition is that the life and teachings of Jesus are against the imperialist logics of exploitation of the poor and of the Earth. It is true that both in the Old and New Testament there are passages that lead to the idea of a human yoke and dominion over nature. There are also dualistic and dichotomous interpretations, especially of terms like “flesh” and “spirit” in the Pauline writings, respectively as something bad and something good. Other dichotomies also do not cooperate for the valuing of society and nature. Among these are those which refer to the “body” and “soul” (the first linked to sin and negative realities and the second as a preferential option linked to the religious scope), those that distinguish the material and the spiritual realities, the world and the Kingdom, the secular and the sacred dimensions and others. The Bible, however, proclaims in its entirety a totally opposed vision: all creation belongs to God and all that was done by him is good and blessed. It is a holistic, comprehensive perspective that values the human being and nature in its integrality and in its inter-relatedness.

Even the verbs “to master” and “to subdue” that appear in biblical texts do not need to be interpreted in an anthropocentric and domineering way. They can be understood within a perspective of alterity and fellowship, if we identify them with an attitude of reiteration of the human consciousness or with a deepening of interiority.

Thus, humanity is seen in Genesis as an expression of the Earth. We were created in order to have a special connection to the planet. We are formed by its own body as if we were children of the Earth. We are the Earth in which the breath became immanent. We are the Earth turned into a way of consciousness. We are not above it or upon it, but we are a part of it.

Thus we are called to live in a profound and conscious relationship with the Earth and with the creative process. We rescue our humanity when we rescue our “earthiness”, i.e., when we recognize that we are a part of the great Earth community.<sup>2</sup>

Thinking in more global religious terms, it is expected that every spiritual tradition may search in its core and in its own foundation the insights that might lead to a reverence for life and an ethics of sharing and care for life in its human and cosmic dimension, as they awaken to an understanding that the sacred is present in history and the cosmos. “If we do so, we will have access to a source of lasting and deep inspiration, which might create the outbreak of a spiritual revolution which can truly save the Earth and enrich the quality of human life.”<sup>3</sup>

From the point of view of concrete actions in our time and taking into consideration the Brazilian reality, it is important to reinforce all existing initiatives in the various social movements and non-governmental organizations that aim to defend the adoption of energy production using the so-called renewable processes, especially wind power. In Brazil, there were several initiatives of the popular governments in the period 2012–2015. Several investments in wind energy as an alternative to fossil fuels were made. The fact that this energy source is renewable, is permanently available, exists everywhere, is clean, that is, does not produce greenhouse gases, and has less environmental impact than other sources, led large social sectors to some optimism. The discontinuity of the government in 2016 may jeopardize these initiatives. Therefore it is even more important the

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2 Boff et al, 434.

3 Ibid, 462.

monitoring of this issue on the part of the ecological movements and religious groups sensitive to this cause.

### **The Faith that Calls Us to Concrete Actions**

At the inter-religious movements in which we participate we have emphasized the vision, essential for the future of humanity, of a life valuing spirituality, sensitive to the caring for nature and the poor, which is concerned the whole, open to the mysteries of the universe and attentive to the main social and political challenges present in the world today. What was flagged reveals an opening sensitivity toward others and to cooperation and respect for human life and nature. It allows us to see the natural world, both the material and human, as living sources of energy and permits us to answer the call to communion with them. The contribution of the Christian faith to eco-spirituality, as it was said, is essential for the dimensions of personal, communal and environmental integration, because it is vital for the biosphere survival.

**Government discontinuity may jeopardize these initiatives; therefore monitoring by ecological movements and religious groups is even more important.**

This process demands from the religious groups, given their ethical and prophetic commitment, a strong criticism of the dominant powers in the context of the capitalist system, especially of the countries that flout the agreements on environmental issues. It also demands coherent internal practices and policies, their presence in public discussions and concrete social propositions developed together with other social sectors.

Such reflections should lead us to concrete actions. They can be implemented both by the various religious groups independently and in a joint ecumenical effort. The religious traditions need to perceive energy decisions as a means of advocating for the poor, protecting vulnerable



communities, caring for God's creation, and moving toward a sustainable and healthy society. It is very important the shifting to renewable energy and the engaging of our communities in interfaith efforts for environmental advocacy and research into energy ethics. For this, it is necessary to describe and analyze the concrete impacts of the climate crisis, to offer specific solutions, or calls for action tied to policy debates. This should be done both on a large scale and on concrete examples of such action. These may include actions ranging from a call to our own faith communities, to promote the immediate transition to the use of 100% renewable energy, to the utterance of prophetic words to governments, demanding from them the increase of their ambitions beyond their commitments in the Paris Agreement, with the adoption of specific projects that support the rapid growth of clean energy systems.

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Based on these approaches we wish to envision a spirituality that values life and is sensitive to the care of nature, to the point of perceiving in it the place of salvation in the same way that we look towards the human being. It is a spirituality that by being ecological defends the poor, learns from them and stands open to the mysteries of the universe and the world, relating them to the social and political challenges that life presents us.



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