

# Oneing

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AN ALTERNATIVE ORTHODOXY

## Christ as the Future Incarnate

By Michael Dowd

*Today mankind is locked into stealing ravenously from the future...  
Human self-restraint, practiced both individually and especially collectively,  
is our indispensable hope.* —William R. Catton, Jr.

**H**UMANITY'S BIGGEST PROBLEMS and most intractable predicaments stem from the failure of its dominant religions to ensure that every aspect of society is accountable to the future. When systems of governance and economics, for example, are free to operate in ways that are heedless of the future, society is propelled on a course that inevitably becomes self-destructive.

Self-destructive is the acknowledged state of our global civilization today. The youth feel it. The generations in power recoil or distract themselves from it. The elders fear that, no matter their individual

good works or gracious attitudes, they will become a generation of ancestors everlastingly reviled.

Author and ecological activist Derrick Jensen has been making this point for years in starkly memorable ways. His was among a series of fifty-six interviews I conducted in 2015.<sup>1</sup> I asked Jensen to recite his no-holds-barred pronouncement, for which he is rightfully famous. He said,

The people who come after us are not going to care about how hard we tried. They're not going to care if we were nice people. They're not going to care if we signed petitions. They're not going to care if we voted Democrat, Republican, or Green. . . . They're not going to care if we wrote really good books. . . . What they're going to care about is whether they can breathe the air and drink the water. They're going to care about whether the land can give them food that they can eat. That's the bottom line, always.<sup>2</sup>

What to do, then—and what, specifically, to do as people of faith? Indeed, can Christianity itself be saved from becoming a reviled ancestor?

In my view, Christianity (and other faith traditions) can and must be saved—“born again” in response to what Reality (God)<sup>3</sup> has been revealing for centuries through all forms of evidence—scientific, historic, cross-cultural, and experiential.<sup>4</sup> The path ahead is well-trodden. We must do what faith leaders (Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Paul Tillich, John Spong, Marcus Borg, Sallie McFague, Thomas Berry, Matthew Fox, Richard Rohr, etc.) have always done in times of great stress and rapid change: reinterpret core mythic insights in light of current collective intelligence and in response to the biggest challenges of the day.

Few things are more important and timely, I suggest, than reinterpreting key Christian concepts in ways that expand “the gospel” to include a call for deep adaptation and sustainability: joyful (*Christian/pro-future*) self- and collective sacrifice in service of redeeming our species. Foremost is this: Let us begin to think of ecology at the heart of theology and Christ as the Future Incarnate.<sup>5</sup> Translating the Trinity into Past, Present, and Future is where we begin.

## THE TRINITY AS PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

**I**N HIS INFLUENTIAL book *Re-Visioning Psychology*, James Hillman wrote:

Loving is a way of knowing, and for loving to know, it must personify. Personifying is thus a way of knowing . . . . Personifying is not a lesser, primitive mode of apprehending but a finer one. . . . To enter myth we must personify; to personify carries us into myth.<sup>6</sup>

There is an enormous difference between believing in God as an otherworldly *person* and knowing God as *Reality personified*.<sup>7</sup> It is the difference between imagining religious concepts as *unnatural* versus experiencing them as *undeniable*.

If we think of the Trinity as three otherworldly persons, each residing off the planet and outside the universe, we trivialize this key theological insight. More, we condemn it to implausibility and irrelevance in our time. However, by wholeheartedly celebrating the role of personification in mythic speech, a deeply ecological and motivating retranslation presents itself: Time becomes a singular reality (God) that is manifest and experienced as three “persons”: Past (Creator), Present (Life, here and now), and Future (Judge and Guide).

- **PAST:** All the creativity that has ever occurred, everything that made this moment possible, including that Mystery out of which this universe was born, occurred in the Past. An I-Thou relationship to the Creator, therefore, entails an intimate personal relationship to the Past as *divine*—even as *divine person*. Moreover, the awesome fourteen-billion-year epic of evolution (Big History or the Universe Story) reveals a past so vast and stupendous that it makes a mockery of human-centered pretensions.
- **PRESENT:** It is Spirit that abides in the Present. For the ancient Hebrews, Spirit was not mere belief. When we see, feel, or hear the wind, we literally experience the Spirit. Indeed, with every breath we experience the Spirit. The language makes it so. The Hebrew word *Ruach* is an I-Thou name for *wind*, *breath*, and *spirit*, all of which are tangible right here, right now. It is the Present

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that affords us opportunity to honor the Past and be guided by the Future: We are suffused with gratitude for the gifts of life and for the ancestors who ensured safe passage of those gifts beyond their own time. We are determined to endow the Future with no less an earthly blessing than we ourselves received.

- **FUTURE:** A sacred realist<sup>8</sup> or ecotheist<sup>9</sup> interpretation of the Messiah or Christ would employ mythic personification so that the Future, too, is experienced as divine Thou. The Future becomes a face of reality to be honored, respected, and faithfully served—*not* taken for granted, defiled, or robbed. Good and evil are clarified in uncertain times when we invite the Future to be our point of reckoning, our divine judge and compassionate guide. Acting with the seventh generation in mind isn't just a good idea; to do otherwise is evil.

## THE FUTURE AS JUDGE AND GUIDE

**T**HE PATTERN OF biblical prophetic speech is straightforward: *We have deviated from God's ways. If abominations A, B, and C continue, horrific consequences X, Y, and Z are inevitable. Therefore, let us repent and return to God.*

The Future as Judge is our warning; the Future as Guide reveals “the way home for the prodigal species.”<sup>10</sup>

John Michael Greer offers a sobering example of Future as Judge, considering the ecological aftermath of our human-centered industrial civilization:

I have no doubt that [our descendants will] have their own opinions about the bitter legacy we're leaving them. As they think back on the people of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries who gave them the barren soil and ravaged fisheries, the chaotic weather and rising oceans, the poisoned land and water, the birth defects and cancers that embitter their lives, how will they remember us? I think I know. I think we will be the orcs and Nazgûl of their legends, the collective Satan of their mythology, the ancient race who ravaged the Earth and everything on it so they could enjoy lives of wretched excess at the future's expense. They will remember us as evil incarnate—and from their perspective, it's by no means easy to dispute that judgment.<sup>11</sup>

In our time, facing the Future as Judge can be paralyzing. That's why the Future as Guide is crucial. Actionable pathways must be communicated, not just in secular form but as moral imperatives.

Here is a stern example—a kind of *Ten Commandments for Today*—that I have been developing and evolving with colleagues for years:

1. Stop defining and measuring progress in short-term, human-centered ways.
2. Stop prioritizing the wants of the wealthy over the needs of the poor.
3. Stop idolizing profligate living and its role-model celebrities.
4. Stop defining good and evil without consulting your ancestors and descendants.
5. Stop extinguishing other species by overharvesting and destroying their habitats.
6. Stop permitting the free or subsidized polluting of the commons.
7. Stop creating chemicals and substances that cannot be consumed by other life forms.
8. Stop using renewable resources faster than they can be replenished.
9. Stop using non-renewable resources in ways that harm and rob future generations.
10. Stop exploring for coal, oil, and natural gas—keep most of it in the ground.

## SECULAR IS NOT SUFFICIENT

**H**OW IMPORTANT IS it for religious moderates and progressives to do the work of reconfiguring religious tenets and then stepping up the prophetic role such mythic insights can play in our own motivations, actions, and advocacies? Noted anthropologist Roy A. Rappaport (1926–1997) was famous for insisting that the non-rational dimensions of religion, such as ritual, are crucial for enforcing the limits upon which ecological health depends. Ecologist and natural philosopher Paul Howe Shepard, Jr. (1925–1996) was equally famous for his tireless insistence that failing to account for the psychological and ecological costs of civilization was shortsighted at best and suicidal in the long run.

Edward “Teddy” Goldsmith (1928–2009) added that we shouldn’t rely on the secularists and the scientists to shout the alarm and plead for painful societal shifts and generational sacrifices. In both *The Stable Society* and his magnum opus, *The Way: An Ecological Worldview*, Goldsmith reviews the unique and irreplaceable role of religion in sustainable societies. Speaking from a systems standpoint, he writes that religion is “the control mechanism of a stable society.”<sup>12</sup>

No other institution—no government, no panel of scientists or ethicists, and certainly no corporation—can effectively constrain human nature in service to the future via moral imperatives.

Examples of religion as the control mechanism of healthy, sustainable societies are most evident today in remnants of intact indigenous cultures. “Lifeways” (rather than “religions”) is the term anthropologists tend to use for the grounding perspectives of such cultures—notably, their ways of interacting with the living world (what we call “the

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environment”) and their *wariness* of assenting to changes that might unfold through time in such a way that the future is harmed (hence, consulting “the seventh generation”).

*Respectful* and *reciprocal* are universal characteristics of pro-future ways of relating to primary reality. How askew from those baselines are our own discount-rated, energy-intensive, resource-exploitative, and profit-maximizing measures of progress?

## THE EVOLUTIONARY AND ECOLOGICAL NECESSITY OF RELIGION

**A**CROSS THE POLITICAL spectrum, nothing seems capable of putting an end to our penchant for consuming the future—and at an ever-accelerating pace. Nature, of course, can be counted on to end that for us in a multiplicity of ways.<sup>13</sup> Arguably, this has already begun.<sup>14</sup>

Those of us who still hope to soften the ecological and cultural landing by redirecting our course lament that secular strategies for eliciting a turn are fading fast. Clearly, our religions must step into their prophetic power for our species to have any chance of redeeming itself within the larger body of life. For Christians I suggest that *Reality is God* and *ecology must be at the heart of theology*.

The dos and don'ts of religious responsibilities and taboos need to express ecological wisdom and foster its attainment, sensitive to the constraints and imperfections of human nature. This is where the more-than-rational enters. This is where Christ as the Future Incarnate and the Future as Judge and Guide can inspire *Christian* (pro-future) activism.

Reality as God, ecology as the heart of theology, and Christ as the Future Incarnate can easily shape values and practices. We can call upon the full range of secular insights drawn from the natural sciences, systems sciences, histories, and humanities for ascertaining how best to work within and reconfigure the dizzying complexities that face us today. Humility, a willingness to learn and reset course, will be crucial too.

My own sense of where to find prophetic guidance draws from the works of Thomas Berry, Dolores LaChapelle, William Catton, William Ophuls, Joanna Macy, Teddy Goldsmith, Robin Wall

Kimmerer, John Michael Greer, Loyal Rue, and others.<sup>15</sup> I see three fundamental standards from which actions can then flow:

1. Wellbeing, progress, and success must be measured in life-centered, not human-centered, ways.
2. Limits are to be treated as sacred and inviolable.
3. Individuals and groups shall not benefit or gain status from actions that harm the community or betray the future.

With respect to these three standards, our own culture clearly is “fallen.” Indeed, we are so far along the path of future-eaters that Christianity—and most of the world’s religions—offer far more assistance to individuals in *cop*ing with a bleak and degrading future than in forestalling such. Thus, expanding on Goldsmith’s idea, *religion is the control mechanism of sustainable cultures and the coping mechanism of unsustainable cultures.*

Said colloquially, religion provides the lifeways and rituals that consistently result in healthy, pro-future living in sustainable cultures. In unsustainable cultures, religion devolves into mere beliefs and practices that help people cope with the challenges of living unsustainably. Both cultural types necessarily promote *social coherence* and *personal wholeness*—and they may well excel at doing so. But only pro-future societies also attend to *ecological integrity*—and without the latter, the culture is doomed.

The evolutionary and ecological necessity of religion is thus to ensure accountability to the future (in mythic language, to be faithful to Christ). No society will last if its religion/lifeway does not ensure that *the future will never be compromised by the present.* No other group or institution can fulfill that critical need.

The judgment is loud and clear. Shaken, we fall to our knees and repent. We are tired of merely coping. Christ as the Future Incarnate now offers, gently yet firmly, the guidance we crave.

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## NOTES

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