

# **UNDERSTANDING GOD'S RELATION TO CREATION BASED ON THE ECOLOGICAL THEOLOGY OF LEONARDO BOFF**

***Reynaldo D. Raluto***

*Understanding the nature of relationship is the core of the emerging ecological theology. Basically, relationality may be viewed from two interrelated dimensions: horizontal and vertical. The former points to creatures' relationship with fellow creatures—as in the case of the relationship between human and non-human creatures; the latter refers to the Creator and creature relationship. This paper focuses on the vertical relationship—God's relationship with creation. Using Leonardo Boff as dialogue partner, relationality is understood in the language of ecological theology. His appropriation of the theological concept of “panentheism” to explain the God-creation relationship is extremely helpful in this regard. Furthermore, Boff conceived the Patristic metaphor of “perichoresis” in a new way in that he used it to explain not only the inner-life of the trinitarian relationship but also the profound relationship that exists between Trinity and creation. This new way of conceiving the vertical relationship leads to an ecological perspective on the mystery of Incarnation and the indwelling of the Spirit in creation. The joint mission of the Son and Spirit is seen from an ecological perspective on God's relation to creation.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

**I**t has been argued that an over-emphasis on a transcendent God strengthens the perspective of an exploitative anthropocentrism which is greatly responsible for ecological destruction of the planet. If people fail to discern the presence of God in the natural world, then the tendency is to forget the sacredness of nature which may, eventually, lead them to presume that they can exploit without any fear of sacrilege or qualm. With this presupposition, this paper argues that one of the most urgent challenges for theologians today is to

emphasize the perpetual presence of God in creation, as well as the sacredness of nature. This means we have to rethink our traditional understanding of God's relation to creation, which is at the heart of ecological theology.

In this paper, we will use the ecological theology of Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff to understand God's relation to creation. We try to present Boff's ideas in three parts. The first part is about his appropriation of the panentheistic view to overcome the lacunae of classical and modern theism, and to articulate the mutual interpenetration between God and creation. The second and third parts try to show how the panentheistic view of God's relation to creation could illuminate our understanding of the joint mission of the Spirit and the Son in the world. As St. Irenaeus of Smyrna in Asia Minor has described, God reaches out to creation with his two "hands"—the Son and Spirit.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, God reaches out to creation through the indwelling of the Spirit and the incarnation of the Son. This is the perspective that this paper wants to emphasize.

## **TOWARD A NEW WAY OF CONCEIVING GOD AND CREATION RELATIONSHIP**

It is not advisable to reject one view without proposing another one. Thus, if we reject the view of classical and modern theism and pantheism, we would also need to propose an alternative one: panentheism. In this section, we try to account for Boff's appropriation of the theological notion of panentheism both as a correction to the reductionism of the old views and as a proposal for a new way of conceiving God's relation to creation.

### ***The Lacuna of Classical and Modern Theism***

According to the scholastic doctrine on God-creation relationship provided by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), God cannot be affected by God's creation because "in God, relation to the

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1. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Chapman, 1999), no. 292.

creature is not a real relation, but only a relation of reason.”<sup>2</sup> This simply means that there is no mutual dependence between God and creation. It also emphasizes the absolute transcendence of God vis-à-vis a creation which is absolutely dependent on God. This non-reciprocal view of relationship has profound consequences on our view of whether or not God really cares for His creation. In this regard, the classical doctrine of theism reaffirms the scholastic view that God—who is an absolute, self-sufficient, perfect, and transcendent being—cannot be affected by the world. The American theologian Elizabeth Johnson exploring the theology of God, asserts that modern theism also reaffirms the view that God is “immutable (only creatures change), incorporeal (bodies are the site of change), impassible (only creatures suffer), omnipotent, omniscient, in contrast to creatures who are limited in power, knowledge, and presence.”<sup>3</sup> Apparently, in both classical and modern frameworks, God has been viewed as non-receptive to the communication of created beings. This is understandable because, according to the Aristotelian perspective, receptivity presupposes some signs of prior imperfection, poverty, incompleteness, inferiority, passivity, potentiality and other negative implications of deficiencies. Needless to say, these characteristics are incompatible with the Aristotelian view of God as pure actuality.

Today, however, the emerging theological reflections on Creator-creature relationship are trying to overcome the lacunae of the said traditional frameworks by recognizing the ontological value of receptivity in God. In fact, receptivity both in God and in creation has been duly recognized as a positive complementarity of the self-communicative dimension which constitutes the communion of beings. This is especially evident in personal beings whose receptivity has been recognized as “purely positive perfection”—as in the case of active, welcoming receptivity—which is, in metaphysical terms, characterized by act-to-act relationship rather than by relationship of act-to-potency. The emerging positive view on receptivity is based

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2. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), I, q. 45, art. 3.

3. Elizabeth Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 15.

on the doctrine of the Trinity in which receptivity has been “represented archetypically by the Second Person,” the receiver of the Father’s infinite fullness of the divine nature.<sup>4</sup>

### **Panentheism: Between Pantheism and Classical Theism**

The scholastic notion of God’s relationship to the natural world, as well as the modern theistic framework of understanding the nature of God, is incompatible with today’s ecological view which emphasizes God’s immanence and trinitarian *perichoresis* (“being-in-one-another”). At this juncture, contemporary theologians have benefited from German philosopher Karl Christian Friedrich Krause (1781-1832) who coined the term “*panentheism*” (all-in-God or God-in-all) which articulates God’s presence in the whole of creation in a new way. Arguably, it can be shown that the meaning of “panentheism” is faithful to the biblical and theological tradition as Saint Paul himself has affirmed that there is “one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and *in all*.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, as distinguished from “*pantheism*” (all-is-God), panentheism is an acceptable theological notion in that it recognizes the difference between God and creation in the event of their mutual interpenetration. Moreover, pantheism is not acceptable as it confuses God and creation to the effect that creation is considered God.

As we have said, Leonardo Boff critically appropriates the notion of panentheism. He creatively makes a visual way of showing the relationship between God and the world from the framework of panentheism. In his words,

God and universe are not like a single circle that has just one center where they meet. They are related like an oval with two centers—God and world—but related and mutually implicated in one another.<sup>6</sup>

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4. On this view, see William Norris Clarke, *Person and Being* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1993), 20, 84.

5. *Ephesians* 4:6. [Emphases are mine].

6. Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* [1995] (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 147. Another visual way of showing the difference between

In panentheistic view, one can rightly say that creation is *in* the Trinity, embraced by the Trinity, and the Trinity is *in* creation, particularized in each creature. Crafting against the classical model of theism, panentheism emphasizes the divine nearness and the involvement of God in the world but without collapsing God and creation into each other. Needless to say, panentheism emerges as an alternative model between the opposing models of pantheism (extreme immanence) and the classical theism (extreme transcendence). Panentheism duly affirms both aspects of God's immanence in and transcendence above the world.

As a mental model, panentheism allows us to conceive of the communion between creation and the Trinity in a new way. In fact, Boff sees panentheism as a helpful framework for conceiving the vertical dimension of *perichoresis*: that is, the mutual presence of Trinity and creation. Certainly, Boff finds that both panentheism and the patristic concept of *perichoresis* are trying to express a similar model of conceiving the proper relationship between God and the cosmos. Although the term panentheism is relatively new in Boff's theological vocabulary, nevertheless, it can be shown that its meaning can already be discerned in some of his early works, particularly in his articulation on the relationship between Trinity and creation.

### ***The Mutual Interpenetration of Trinity and Creation***

The mutual interpenetration between the Trinity and creation may be seen from two perspectives. On the one hand, it can be said that the Trinity is *in* creation. As Boff has explained,

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pantheism and panentheism was provided by Elizabeth Johnson: "I like to draw a big circle that stands for God. Then draw a second circle which stands for ourselves. If you draw that circle to be exactly the same as the big circle, therefore collapsing the two into each other, that's pantheism—all is God. But if you draw that big circle which is God, and then draw within it another circle, a little circle and that's us, then that is panentheism—all is in God in whom we live and move and have our being." See Elizabeth Johnson, "NCR Podcast: Interview with Elizabeth Johnson," available from: [http://ncrnews.org/ncrpodcasts/fox\\_ejohnson.pdf](http://ncrnews.org/ncrpodcasts/fox_ejohnson.pdf) (accessed: 12.05.10).

[The] Father creates all things from the inexhaustible source of his life and love, through the Son in whom all things are enclosed as in an eternal prototype, by the power of the Holy Spirit which unites all things from their heart and leads them back to the Father.<sup>7</sup>

It can be recalled that, in a number of cases, Boff stresses that creation, as God's created difference, "finds its reason for being in the fact that it is a receptacle of Divinity."<sup>8</sup> The created cosmos, therefore, bears the mark of the sacred as it is a receiver of God's presence and serves, so to speak, as "the body of the Trinity."<sup>9</sup> For this reason, sacramental and liturgical theology teaches that even simple material things (e.g., water, oil, bread, and wine) can be bearers of divine grace. This way of sanctifying the material universe is not totally new in the history of Christian theology. This approach seems to come close to Baruch Spinoza's (1632-1677) view of the "materialization of God" – in Spinoza's panentheistic vision of the world material extension is one of the attributes of God.<sup>10</sup>

However, it should be noted that an infinite God cannot be fully contained in the materiality of creation that is essentially finite.

On the other hand, Boff also proposes to see creation as being *in* the Trinity, that is, as "inserted in the very life, communion and 'history' of the Trinity."<sup>11</sup> This proposition presupposes that the Trinity is infinitely greater than the whole of creation. As Jürgen Moltmann writes, "the trinitarian relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is so wide that the whole creation can find space,

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7. Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns (Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1988), 130.

8. Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 185.

9. Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 230.

10. Let us call to mind that those who follow the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) significantly consider the "material extension" as an attribute to God—resulting into "the materialization of God and the divinization of the material universe." Hence, the body or material extension has acquired a certain religious value in our contemporary worldview. On this account, see Georges De Schrijver, "Religion and Cosmology at the End of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century," *CTNS Bulletin* 14 (1994): 1-15, especially 5-10.

11. Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 227. Boff makes it clear that the Trinity has a "history" because of the specific role the respective divine persons play in the creation of the world.

time and freedom in it.”<sup>12</sup> In any case, the two perspectives are both providing the same picture: the Trinity is *in* creation, which in turn is inserted back into the bosom of the Trinity. To put it differently, all creatures journeyed out (*exitus*) from the Trinity; they shall journey back (*reditus*) to the Trinity—the ultimate source, sustainer, and destiny of all created realities.

As one can see, the panentheistic framework is at home with the new cosmological vision developed by Process thinking which sets God within the ongoing creative process of the emergence of novelty in the cosmos. As Boff has paraphrased it, God and the world are “perichoretically involved in one another” so that “everything that happens in the world somehow affects God, and everything that happens in God somehow affects the world.”<sup>13</sup> Boff also claims that, in the cosmic process, God and the cosmos mutually affect each other but in such a way that their respective identity and difference is maintained: God is *in* the cosmos but the cosmos is *not* God, and vice-versa.<sup>14</sup> Boff rightly affirms that the utterly transcendent God is radically immanent in the world: God freely shares in the world’s continuing cosmic process, reveals God’s self in it, and is being enriched with it. In this perspective, God’s abiding presence in *creatio continua* may be expressed in terms of creation’s emergence from cosmogenesis to biogenesis to anthropogenesis to Christogenesis (Teilhard de Chardin). These phases of ongoing creation, for Boff, may also be seen as historical manifestations of the incomprehensible mystery of the triune God. Boff argues that the Trinity is not only the prime Agent who has set everything in motion but also the perpetual companion and guide of the whole creation in its temporal

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12. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (London: SCM, 1981), 109.

13. Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 147.

14. Panentheism affirms that we are of God, part of God, in God, but not God. This is puzzling to a pantheistic thinking *how* come that creation does not become God in the event of mutual interpenetration of God and creation. This demands us to explain the classical distinction between trinitarian “procession” and the act of creation. Unlike the former, the act of creation is not a communication of divine nature but of divine goodness that is appropriate to what is not-God—the creation. Moreover, it should be maintained that God cannot fully communicate the divine goodness—as it infinitely exists in God—to a creation that is essentially finite.

journey back to the true *oikos* (home) and to its ultimate point of origin and destiny—the trinitarian communion of love.

## **THE INDWELLING OF THE SPIRIT**

The presence of God in the world is manifested in the indwelling of the Spirit. This aspect needs to be emphasized in the face of today's lack of respect for nature and the seeming absence of God in the world. To do this, we need to retrieve ecological insights on the presence of the Spirit in creation.

### ***The Problematic of Trinitarian Procession***

It is a fact that, although the religious experience of the early church was already trinitarian, the Christian confession of the Holy Spirit as “the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father” was articulated only at the ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 381. Prior to this official definition, it can be recalled, the Old Testament account views both the Word (*Logos*) and the Spirit of God simply as “personified agents”<sup>15</sup> of the divine presence of the transcendent God. Moreover, at the ecumenical council of Nicaea (325), the profession of faith did not say anything new about the Spirit. Finally, it was at the Council of Toledo (675) that the Church magisterium had formally defined that “The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, is God, one and equal with the Father and the Son, of the same substance and also of the same nature.”<sup>16</sup> At this juncture, the theological position of the Latin Fathers has introduced the controversial notion of *filioque* (“and also from the Son”) to emphasize that the Spirit “proceeds from the Father and the Son,” whereas the Greek tradition holds that the Spirit proceeds from the Father *through* the Son. Unfortunately, this formulation constitutes a point of disagreement between the Latin Rite and the Orthodox Churches of the Eastern tradition until today.

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15. On this account, see Gerald O'Collins, *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity* (London: Chapman, 1999), 23-24.

16. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 245.

As officially formulated in the Council of Florence in 1438, the Latin tradition confesses that “The Holy Spirit is eternally from the Father and Son; He has his nature and subsistence at once (*simul*) from the Father and the Son. He proceeds eternally from both as from one principle and through one spiration.”<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, this magisterial formulation creates an impression that the Holy Spirit is dependent on both the Father and the Son. Moreover, the emphasis on divine procession has the tendency to be misinterpreted as a kind of theogony. To overcome this danger, many theologians, including Leonardo Boff, have opted to strongly emphasize the eternal simultaneity and perichoretic unity of the three divine Persons. In this perspective, the Persons do not proceed from one another in a hierarchical way, but on the basis of interpersonal relations. Thus, for Boff, “there is not only a *Filioque* but a *Spirituque* and *Patreque*.<sup>18</sup> Significantly, the dynamism of *perichoresis* gives a rich image of a “circular movement” as each of the divine Persons “dance around the other.”

### ***Retrieving the Cosmic Role of the Spirit as Creator and Giver of Life***

Having seen the theological problematic of trinitarian procession, it remains to be said that there is also an obstacle for conceiving the divine presence of the Spirit in the natural world. In the past centuries after the Reformation, Christian theology has mainly focused its study of the Spirit on its impact on humanity. As Elisabeth Johnson has critically pointed out, “Catholic theology tied the Spirit very tightly to church office and the teaching of the magisterium, while Protestant theology fastened onto the Spirit’s work of justification and sanctification in the individual person.”<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the relationship of the Spirit to the natural world has been neglected. This anthropocentrism fails to do justice to the overall involvement of the Holy Spirit in the cosmos. To overcome this lacuna, we need to rediscover the cosmic presence and activity of the Spirit in the natural

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17. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 246-47.

18. Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 165.

19. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*, 182.

world as witnessed by the biblical, patristic, and medieval theologians. To cope with the contemporary challenges, theology also needs to reflect on the ecological insights offered to us by the earth sciences in the light of the Christian doctrine of the Spirit as Creator (*Spiritus Creator*) and as “Lord and Giver of life” (*Dominus et vivificantem*). Following Boff, let us allow the emerging ecological reflection to help us understand the deeper theological implications of the Spirit as Creator and Giver of life.

By way of retrieval, Boff re-views the Western root metaphors and etymologies of “spirit” which might give us access to “animistic” worldview of our ancestors. As well known, the English word “spirit” is used to translate the Hebrew word *ruach* (from the verbal root *rwḥ*), whose original meaning, according to Boff, is not “breath” or “wind” but “the atmospheric space between heaven and earth,” which can be calm or turbulent.<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that, in the Septuagint, “*ruach*” has been translated as *pneuma* which refers to “the living and generating substance that is diffused in animals, plants and all things.”<sup>21</sup> Significantly, *ruach* has been translated into Latin as “*spiritus*” which is grammatically masculine. Whereas, the word *ruach* in Hebrew is grammatically feminine; the word *pneuma* in Greek is grammatically neuter. For Johnson, this changing gender is an indication that God’s Spirit goes beyond the categories of gender.<sup>22</sup> After all, even if the Spirit did not incarnate in a particular human face, the Spirit can freely emerge in various genders: it can be present both in nonhuman (as an “it”) and in human beings—inclusive of both female and male. Meanwhile, part of retrieving the cosmic activity of the Spirit, Boff has tried to highlight the feminine image of Spirit as possibly suggested in the *Genesis* creation story. As the biblical author describes, in the beginning of creation, “the earth was a formless

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20. Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 159. Boff points out that “*ruach* means the vital sphere where the human being, the animal, or any other living thing imbibes life.”

21. Yves Congar, *I believe in the Holy Spirit*, vol. 1, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury Press, 1983), 3. Other sources simply translate *pneuma* as the “breath of the cosmos.” See O. R. Jones, “Pneuma” in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 690.

22. See Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 83.

void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a *wind from God* swept over the face of the waters.”<sup>23</sup> This creative action of the “wind from God” (which has been commonly translated as “the Spirit of God”), according to Boff, “refers to the way the water birds circle over the waters or break the egg—here the cosmic egg—from which all proceeds.”<sup>24</sup>

Significantly, this is a symbolic gesture of the maternal function of the Spirit in giving birth to creation that breaks the stranglehold of androcentric and patriarchal thinking.

### **The Various Forms of Expression of the Spirit in Creation**

For Boff, the category of “spirit,” which is virtually present in all cultural traditions, can illumine the findings of contemporary cosmology which sees the Earth as a living planet. English physicist Stephen Hawking, at the end of his *Brief History of Time*, asks a famous question: “What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe?”<sup>25</sup> Although Hawking has left this question open, owing to his adherence to “methodological naturalism,” nevertheless, Christians dare to believe that it is the Creator Spirit who “breathes fire into the equations” that describe our universe. As we have asserted, the Creator Spirit is the *wind from God* that sustains the breath of every living creature. Creatures, therefore, continually breathe because of the Creator Spirit—the common breath of the Father and the Son. As the *Book of Job* declares, “The spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.”<sup>26</sup> This clearly shows that, indeed, the Spirit of God—as the

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23. *Genesis* 1:2. [Emphases are mine].

24. Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 160. For a helpful presentation of the feminine image of the Spirit, see Elizabeth Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 45-46. Johnson explains that “wind is connected with wings” that is why the appearance of the dove during the baptism of Jesus (see Mk 1: 9-12) reminds us of the presence of the Spirit of God.

25. Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (New York: Bantam, 1988), 174.

26. *Job* 33:4.

breath shared by the Father and the Son—is Creator and Giver of life. Boff points out that, in ecological theology, the Creator Spirit is seen as the “energy-giving reality” and the “driving force of the cosmogenic process” that animates the cosmos and enables from within the existence, evolution, and flourishing of the universe of creatures.<sup>27</sup> The Creator Spirit permeates the whole cosmos from the first moment of its existence and remains in it permanently to serve as the divine immanent power of continuing creation which is responsible for initiating from within the newness and renewal of all things; creating the differences and complexities; and actualizing the communion of all created beings.<sup>28</sup>

The indwelling Spirit, although not a product of evolutionary process, reveals itself in the various stages of the cosmogenic process and emerges gradually from particular forms until it reaches its highest expression: the divine Spirit.<sup>29</sup>

Boff unfolds the various forms of expression of the Spirit in the evolutionary history of the universe into five phases: first, in the energy and elementary components that make up the cosmos; second, in the perpetual movements of the physical world; third, in the vital energy that animates the living world of plants and animals; fourth, in the unique interiority and dynamism of human subjects, especially, in the spirit which empowers the prophets to speak the truth; and fifth, in the originating root energy in God, who is the true domain of life—the “*rūachsphere*” or the “*pneumatosphere*.<sup>30</sup>” Boff makes it clear that our experience of the human spirit, including the human experience of the Spirit in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, serves as the basis for our affirmation of the divine Spirit “who extends the characteristics of the spirit in the form of infinity, eternity, and fulfilment.”<sup>30</sup>

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27. See Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 159, 169; see also Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994). Pannenberg affirms that “the Spirit of God is the life-giving principle, to which all creatures owe life, movement, and activity.” (p. 32).

28. Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 167.

29. See Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 160.

30. Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 161.

The foregoing assertion clearly implies that the omnipresent divine Spirit, who accompanies the cosmogenic process throughout space and time, freely shares in the cost and travail of the evolution of creation. The indwelling Spirit, as a radically relational God, is infinitely compassionate and does not stand at the neutral distance but perpetually shares in the “ups” and “downs” of creation. Contrary to the position of classical theism, Boff’s theology is largely in line with that of other ecological theologians who claim that the Spirit “rejoices with creation, suffers with it, groans along with the other creatures awaiting redemption and liberation.”<sup>31</sup> In the words of Australian theologian Denis Edwards, “The Creator Spirit is with creatures in their finitude, death and incompleteness, holding each in redemptive love, and is in some way already drawing each into unforeseeable eschatological future in the divine life.”<sup>32</sup> This ecological view affirms the emerging notion of the created cosmos as the “body of God” which directly challenges the anthropocentric presumption of a God being only concerned about the suffering of human beings.

### ***The Pneumatification of the Whole Creation***

For Boff, it would not be enough to recognize that the Spirit dwells in the cosmos as It animates the ongoing creation. Our Christian tradition teaches that the Spirit has been actively and intensely present in “begetting God outside God”—that is, in making possible the incarnation of the Son. In the words of Ambrose of Milan

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31. Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 169.

32. Denis Edwards, “Every Sparrow that Falls to the Ground: The Cost of Evolution and the Christ-Event,” in *Ecotheology* 11 (2006): 103-23, 115. Elsewhere, Edwards provides an excellent theological explanation on the capacity of the Spirit to suffer with creation, see Denis Edwards, *Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit* (New York: Orbis Books, 2004). Edwards argues that “the Spirit of God suffers with suffering creation. The Holy Spirit suffers not out of necessity and not out of imperfection but in the active freedom of the divine love. This kind of suffering springs from the incomprehensible depths of divine compassion. The Spirit suffers with creation not to glorify suffering but in order to bring liberation and healing. The Spirit is the companion to each creature, loving it into being and opening up a future for it in God.” (p. 114).

(339-397), “we cannot doubt that the Spirit is Creator, whom we know as the author of the Lord’s incarnation.”<sup>33</sup> As we know, this is expressed in the *Apostles’ Creed* which declares Jesus Christ as “conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Meanwhile, Boff seriously took the implication of the mission of the Spirit in the world. He argues that if the Spirit has been *sent*, then there must be a particular receiving subject to which the Spirit, as Divine Person, is fully present in a complete self-communication. Arguably, as Boff maintains, that receiving subject is Mary of Nazareth whom the Spirit “spiritualized” or “pneumatified” in a supremely unique way that never happened before to any other creatures. To make the incarnation of the Son of God possible, Boff claims that Mary, as a creature, will have to “be raised to God’s height.”<sup>34</sup>

In the words of the scriptures, Mary will have to be overshadowed by the Most High, so that “the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.”<sup>35</sup> This means, according to Boff’s theological hypothesis, that the Holy Spirit descended directly upon and personally over Mary of Nazareth, without Christological mediation, to the effect that she has been made into the Holy Spirit’s “temple, sanctuary, and tabernacle in so real and genuine a way that she has to be regarded as hypostatically united to the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity.”<sup>36</sup> However, despite this singular fullness of grace bestowed upon Mary, it has to be maintained that she remains an ever humble creature of God.

In the light of the mission of the Spirit, Boff has pointed out that what happened to Mary of Nazareth at the event of incarnation has an eternal and universal significance for the eschatological destiny of the entire creation. Here, Boff’s explanation deserves a full quotation:

At one point of the history of humankind and the universe, a woman is at the center of everything. In her dwells the Spirit. Out

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33. Ambrose, *Holy Spirit* 2.5.41, in *Theological and Dogmatic Works*, Fathers of the Church Series, vol. 44 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 110.

34. Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 170.

35. *Luke* 1:35; cf.

36. Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 170; cf. Boff, *The Maternal Face of God*, 93.

of her this Spirit produces the holy humanity of Jesus, the man assumed by the Word. At one moment the two divine Persons are in her, the Spirit and the Word, communicating themselves, *anticipating the blessed end of the entire creation* and opening the perspective of what is to happen with each human person, each in his or her own way, time, and measure: being able to receive God and hence, while preserving the difference between creature and Creator, capable of unity with God, that is, of being one with God the Trinity.<sup>37</sup>

As we have seen above, the glorious risen body of Jesus manifests the features of the Spirit: fullness of life, total communication, and transfiguration of material reality. This foreshadowing of the irrevocable promise of “pneumatification” and the transformation in Christ of all creation will be realized at the end of history. The outpouring of the Spirit upon the church in the Pentecost event anticipates the eschatological communion of all God’s creatures with the Trinity.

## THE INCARNATION OF THE SON

There is a tendency among the dominant Christologies today to interpret the mystery of incarnation mainly from an anthropocentric perspective to the effect of neglecting its significance for the non-human creatures. To broaden this narrow perspective, Boff insists that there is a need to emphasize the truth that the incarnation of the Son has a universal significance for the whole of creation. As an “exchange of presence” between God and creation, the event of incarnation implies that the whole of creation is sacred and calls for due respect and care.

### ***The Incarnation of God’s Word and Wisdom in Jesus Christ***

It has been asserted that it was due to their reflection on the encompassing meaning of the resurrection event that the New Testament writers, including the early Christians, dared to place Jesus

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37. Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 172. [Emphases are mine].

in a universal and even cosmic perspective—which is beyond the claims of strict Jewish monotheism. As Boff has pointed out, in the resurrection event, “Jesus was transfigured and brought into God’s mode of being.”<sup>38</sup> It has been generally agreed by today’s biblical scholars that the account of Jesus of Nazareth in the New Testament was written from the perspective of the resurrection event which broadens the search for his true identity and origins. Thus, the gospel of *Matthew* presents Jesus as a descendant of Abraham, the noble father of Hebrew people. *Luke’s* Gospel even tries to go further by viewing Jesus as a descendant of Adam—thus, involving the entire history of humankind in the life of Jesus. Significantly, *John’s* Gospel still goes further by projecting the origins of Jesus, the incarnate Word and Wisdom, back into the very mystery of God.<sup>39</sup> John’s descending Christology affirms the pre-existence of the Word and Wisdom of God who became incarnate in Jesus, whom the Christians recognized as the Messiah or the Christ.

Moreover, we may infer that the impact of the resurrection event has enabled the biblical writers of the New Testament to see Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word and Wisdom of God, who—in the Old Testament account—has been closely associated with assisting Jhwh in the divine work of creation, revelation, and salvation. In fact, it can be shown that the New Testament authors conveniently transferred to Jesus Christ the qualities and functions usually assigned to the Word and Wisdom of God in the Old Testament. This transfer gave rise to two complementary Christologies which directly relate to the creation event. On the one hand, the Logos Christology, which is very evident in the Prologue of *John’s* Gospel, re-echoes the creation account in *Genesis* and proclaims that the Word was with God in the beginning and “all things came into being through [the Word].”<sup>40</sup>

The Logos Christology is also affirmed in the *Letter to the Hebrews* which teaches that it is the Word of God that continually forms the universe and unfailingly sustains all things.<sup>41</sup> Finally, the *Second Letter*

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38. Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 175.

39. Cf. *Matthew* 1:1-17; *Luke* 3:23-38; *John* 1:1-14; see Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 174-75.

40. *John* 1:3.

41. Cf. *Hebrews* 1:3, 11:3.

of Peter recapitulates this by claiming that the world is governed by the Word of God from the beginning to the end.<sup>42</sup>

On the other hand, the Wisdom Christology transpires in many Wisdom sayings in the New Testament which claim that all things are created *in* and *through* Christ. This is particularly the case in the writings of Saint Paul. Thus, in his *First Letter to the Corinthians*, written in the year 50 AD, St. Paul attested that there is “one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are *all things* and through whom we exist.”<sup>43</sup> Elsewhere, St. Paul also teaches that Jesus Christ “is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation; for him *all things* in heaven and earth were created.”<sup>44</sup> Lastly, according to St. Paul’s vision, God’s plan in the fullness of time is to gather up *all things* in Christ, “things in heaven and things on earth.”<sup>45</sup>

### ***The Son of God became “Flesh,” not just Human***

It is on the basis of a creation seen in the light of Word and Wisdom that the Franciscan theologian John Duns Scotus (1265-1308) argued that the primary motive of incarnation is not redemption from sin but the self-giving of God’s love to creation.<sup>46</sup> It is well known that Thomas Aquinas sided with those who claimed that the Word became flesh to save the human race from sin. Against this view, Boff embraces the Scotist position and criticizes the other position as anthropocentric in the sense that it overemphasizes the centrality of human sin in God’s plan for salvation. Boff fully agrees with Scotus that incarnation would have happened regardless of sin “because creation was projected in, for, and through the Son.”<sup>47</sup> at the center of the divine plan is not salvation from sin but the incarnation of the Son which would make possible the adoption and deification

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42. Cf. 2 Peter 3:7.

43. *1 Corinthians* 8:6.

44. *Colossians* 1:15.

45. *Ephesians* 1:10.

46. For a fresh look at this old debate, see Ilia Delio, “Revisiting the Franciscan Doctrine of Christ,” *Theological Studies* 64 (2003): 3-23.

47. Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 185.

of all creation. In fact, creation and incarnation always belong together as the two sides of the single act of divine self-giving of love to the world.<sup>48</sup> Incarnation, therefore, is not contingent on human sin but forms part of the original divine plan that, in the fullness of time, the created order will be united and gathered together under the headship of Christ.

It becomes clear that the incarnation of the Son is *intrinsically* part of the unfolding of the divine plan to crown the creation with divinization in the fullness of time. It also turns out that incarnation has always been in God's mind and its seed gradually grows within the evolving process right from the very first moment of continuing creation until it comes into bloom in Jesus Christ. It can be said that one of the surest empirical discoveries of new cosmology and other earth sciences is the fact that everything, including human beings, is in a process of genesis and evolution. Based on the definitive declaration at the General Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) that Jesus Christ is not only "one in being" with God as to the divinity but also "one in being [*homoousios*] with us as to the humanity,"<sup>49</sup> we can infer that Jesus Christ is not exempted from the natural laws of evolution and the dynamism of ecological connectedness. Like any other created beings, whose bodies form an intrinsic part of planetary and cosmic matter, the human flesh of Jesus Christ did not come from an outside world, like an already finished or ready-made product being inserted in human history. On the contrary, if Jesus Christ were truly consubstantial with us in his humanity, then the incarnation of the Son in him must truly be a cosmic event, that is, it must have emerged within the evolutionary process of anthropogenesis.

For Boff, this means that Jesus is a product of the initial great explosion and inflation of the Big Bang, that his roots are in the Milky Way; his homeland is the solar system, and his house is planet Earth. He took part in the emergence of life and the formation of consciousness. Like any human being, he is a child of the universe and of Earth. He belongs to a human family.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the incarnation

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48. For this view, see Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 197.

49. Jacques Dupuis, ed., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* (Bangalore: Theological Publications of India, 1996), 203.

50. Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 179.

of the Son in Jesus of Nazareth reveals the kenotic love of God for the whole of creation.

To express this radical divine reach into the very tissue of biological existence and into the wider interconnected system of nature, Danish theologian Niels Henrik Gregersen has coined the term radical or “deep incarnation.”<sup>51</sup> If we interpret John’s Gospel from this perspective, which declares Jesus of Nazareth as the Word made “flesh” (*sarx*), then we will realize that he did not just become a human flesh but *flesh in general*—that is, “the whole interconnected world of fleshy life”<sup>52</sup>—which the Word embraces. Thus, this cosmic character of incarnation implies that the Son of God did not only assume the human flesh and the flesh of the whole of humanity but also the cosmic flesh of nonhuman creation, including, to a certain extent, the whole cosmic reality to which the flesh relates and on which it depends. It goes without saying that the deeper and radical meaning of incarnation overcomes the anthropocentric interpretation of incarnation that is common in many Christologies. This perspective of incarnation has a significant repercussion on the emerging ecological understanding of salvation and resurrection. As the patristic adage goes, “What God has not assumed, God has not saved.” Since God has assumed the “flesh,” salvation goes beyond human flesh.

Interpreting Christ’s cosmic solidarity with creation in the light of deep incarnation reveals God’s radical receptivity and allows us to understand the divine *kenosis* (self-emptying)—particularly the Son’s suffering and death on the cross—in a new way. Boff affirms that,

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51. See Niels Henrik Gregersen, “The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40 (2001): 205.

52. Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith: The Change of Heart that Leads to a New Way of Living on Earth* (New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 58. For a more radical interpretation on the ecological implications of deep incarnation, see Neil Darragh, *At Home in the Earth* (Auckland: Accent Publications, 2000). According to the non-anthropocentric interpretation of this New Zealand theologian, “To say that God became flesh is not only to say that God became human, but to say also that God became an Earth creature, that God became a sentient being, that God became a living being (in common with all other living beings), that God became a complex Earth unit of minerals and fluids, that God became an item in the carbon and nitrogen cycles.” (p. 124).

even before the event of incarnation took shape in Jesus of Nazareth, the *Christus evolutor* has been taking part in the vicissitudes of evolution and in the suffering of the world caused by human and cosmic evils, including the cruel facts of cosmogenic process and “barbarous excess” of suffering and evil: the mass extinction of most species, the great human cataclysms of wars, and the genocide of whole peoples.<sup>53</sup> Based on this view, it can be said that the suffering of Christ did not only begin within the historical event of the passion and death of Jesus of Nazareth but rather ever since the emergence of sentient creatures who have suffered the violent forces of cosmic evils.

Furthermore, considering that the Son of God is universally present in all creatures, we can rightly say that God, out of loving compassion, freely embraces the entire history of suffering and pain of the evolving cosmos. From the perspective of deep incarnation, the passion and death of Jesus Christ on the cross “becomes an icon of God’s redemptive co-suffering” with all the victims of cosmic and human evils.<sup>54</sup> As liberator and savior of creation, the crucified Christ also proves that he faithfully bears the negative costs of evolution till the end, including the great price of suffering involved in natural selection, in order to give meaning to the cosmic suffering and the dark side of evolution. In sum, it turns out that, through the indwelling of the Spirit and the incarnation of the Son, a pathway is opened for all the suffering of creation to be taken up into the very being of the Trinity. We can, therefore, claim that the “divine suffering” is a perfection which allows the immanent Trinity to be freely affected and to be deeply touched by the suffering of creation.<sup>55</sup>

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53. See *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 180. For a fine theological reflection on suffering of creation, see Denis Edwards, “Every Sparrow that Falls to the Ground: The Cost of Evolution and the Christ-Event,” *Ecotheology* 11 (2006): 103-23.

54. Gregersen, “The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World,” 205.

55. For a good discussion on the theological issue of whether or not God really suffers, see Gerry O’Hanlon, *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthazar* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 72. Following Balthazar, O’Hanlon explains that “In God suffering is supra-temporal and free, it is a perfection entirely compatible with joy and happiness, and with the divine victory over the negativity of human suffering” (p. 176).

## The Cosmic Presence of the Son: The Cosmic Christ

Our interpretation of the cosmic character of incarnation in the light of the Johannine declaration that “the Word was made flesh” helps us to understand the famous notion of “cosmic Christ” (“*Christ cosmique*”) or “universal Christ” proposed by Jesuit scientist and theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955). Although the title “*Christ*” in Greek, which is “*Messiah*” in Hebrew, means the “anointed,” Boff argues that it is a term with a cosmic dimension. In the words of Teilhard, Christ does not only have human and divine natures but also “cosmic attribute.”<sup>56</sup>

Indeed, as Teilhard argued, Christ is the “principle of universal consistence” and “clothed in the earth” as the “bond that runs through all things.”<sup>57</sup> In this light, Boff insists that the title *Christ* has to be understood not as a noun but as a “modifying adjective.” Thus, in his appropriation of Teilhard’s cosmic Christology, Boff recognizes that there is a “Christic” element in the cosmos, for all things are “marked by the Son” and have been “anointed and Christofied” through the Son.<sup>58</sup> This Christic element in the cosmos came from the inner life of the Trinity. Boff makes it clear that even before the incarnation of the Son, the Christic element was already existing and continually operating within the cosmogenic and anthropogenic processes.

Moreover, in Boff’s view, this Christic element gradually emerged within the long evolutionary process of the cosmos until the time was reached when it found its utmost expression in a particular human

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56. On this account, see David Grumett, *Teilhard de Chardin: Theology, Humanity and Cosmos* (Peeters: Leuven, 2005), 113-16, 127-29; see also Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “Some Reflections on the Conversion of the World [1936],” in *Science and Christ*, trans. René Hague (London: Collins, 1968). Teilhard has occasionally explored a Christology which posits the cosmic quality as Christ’s “third” nature. He writes: “Christ possesses ‘universal’ or ‘cosmic’ attributes in addition to his strictly human and divine attributes.” (p. 122).

57. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “Pantheism and Christianity [1923],” in *Christianity and Evolution* (San Diego: Harvest, 1974), 71, 75.

58. See Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 185; cf. *Colossians* 3:11. St. Paul proclaims that “Christ is all and in all.”

face, Jesus of Nazareth, to whom the Christians gave the title *the Christ*. From this perspective, Boff proposes to view the event of incarnation as the “crystallization” and “personalization” of the Christic dimension in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>59</sup> It should be noted, however, that the incarnation of the Son in a particular human person, Jesus of Nazareth, did not monopolize the Christic element, as if the rest of creation had been deprived of it. In fact, as Boff maintains, the universe of creation is in the process of being transformed into Christ, a process which Teilhard has called *Christogenesis*. As Boff has insisted, what the Christians firmly believe is that, within this Christogenic process, “Jesus was that one intended to receive the Son maximally within all human reality, and with him all other humans, each in his or her way and moment [received this same ‘sonly’ quality], for all have been projected in the Son, for the Son, and with the Son to be receptacles of the Son.”<sup>60</sup> Thus, all creatures, in communion with Jesus Christ, are made and destined by God to receive the imprint of the Son in their unique ways, because, in principle, no finite creature—including Jesus of Nazareth—can ever have an exhaustive capacity to fully receive the infinite self-communication of God.

Today, in the light of cosmic Christology, we can rightly say that the whole of creation continues to cry out for Christ as we experience various cosmic disorders and chaos (entropy) which are deemed to be part of the cosmogenic process of a dynamically evolving universe. Although this evolutionary process with its setback of entropy will continue in the future, nevertheless, the prevailing cosmological theory informs us that this will lead to a purposeful and meaningful end—the birth of new and ever-higher self-organizing orders (syntropy).<sup>61</sup> For Boff, this theory suggests that “we are faced

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59. See Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 178.

60. Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 185. Elsewhere, Boff explains that “When Christians give the title Christ to Jesus they intend to say: in this specific man, with whose humble origins in the town of Nazareth we are familiar..., the mystery of God has been made supremely manifest. He is *the ecce homo* (Behold the man), he in whom this self-revelation of God has been given.” (p. 177). Prigogine & Isabelle Stenger, *Order out of Chaos* (London: Heinemann, 1984). Quoted by Boff?

61. For this cosmological theory of entropy and syntropy, see Ilya.

not with terminal death but with the transfiguration of the cosmogenic process into supremely ordered and vital new forms of life.”<sup>62</sup> Significantly, this hope for a happy ending of cosmic history finds its theological basis in Christian faith in the resurrection of the crucified Christ whose “eschatologized” state anticipates the final destiny of creation in the reign of the Trinity. Boff highlights the fact that the risen Christ was the crucified Christ—that is, a victim of the forces of evil—hence, foreshadowing the certain resurrection of the victims represented by the fate of Jesus Christ.

To highlight this hopeful end of cosmic history, Boff appropriates Teilhard’s vision of “Omega point” which emphasizes that the progress of evolution is not blind and that evolution needs to reach a certain end or Omega point where the “unified plural” meets the “active centre of unification.”<sup>63</sup>

For Teilhard, as well as for Boff, that Omega point or that “active center of unification” is the Christ of faith, he who is believed to be the head of the cosmos and of the church. This is biblically expressed by Saint Paul in the Greek concept of *anakephalaiosis*: “to gather up all things in Christ,” the head.<sup>64</sup> Saint Paul sums up the cosmic role of Jesus Christ in these words: “When all things are subjected to him [the Son], then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all.”<sup>65</sup>

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62. Leonardo Boff, “Earth as Gaia: An Ethical and Spiritual Challenge,” in Elaine Wainwright, Luiz Carlos Susin, and Felix Wilfred, *Eco-Theology*, Concilium Series (London: SCM Press, 2009): 24-33, 26; cf. Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, xii, 15.

63. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “Some General Views on the Essence of Christianity [1939],” in *Christianity and Evolution* (San Diego: Harvest, 1974), 133.

64. *Ephesians* 1:10.

65. *1 Corinthians* 15:28. Teilhard’s meditation on this text has strengthened his claim that even Christ himself will return to the Father. It should be made clear that, for Teilhard, the final consummation of created cosmos lies in God, who is *beyond* the Omega point. In other words, Teilhard did not consider the Omega point as identical with the transcendent God or the immanent Trinity. See Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “The Last Page of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s Diary [1955],” in *The Heart of Matter* (San Diego: Harvest, 1974), 103-04; see also Grumett, *Teilhard de Chardin*, 220-28.

## CONCLUSION

We have argued in this paper that there is a need to rethink our prevailing concepts of God's relation to creation – concepts which, on close inspection, endorse the ecological destruction of the planet. As an alternative, we have proposed Boff's creative appropriation of the theological notion of panentheism which seeks to articulate God's relation to creation in a new way. Indeed, panentheism proves to be an apt framework for recovering the ecological dimensions of the joint mission of the Spirit and the Son in the world. In this regard, we have tried to highlight the originality of Boff's theological reflection on the ecological import of the indwelling of the Spirit and the incarnation of the Son in the whole of creation. For him, God is actively present in the evolutionary cosmic processes through the working of the Spirit and the Son. The realization of this active presence sensitizes us to the sacredness of creation and awakens in us the feelings of respect we so direly need in our care for the natural world.

*Reynaldo D. Raluto  
St. John Vianney Theological Seminary  
Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines  
Email: reyrals@yahoo.com*