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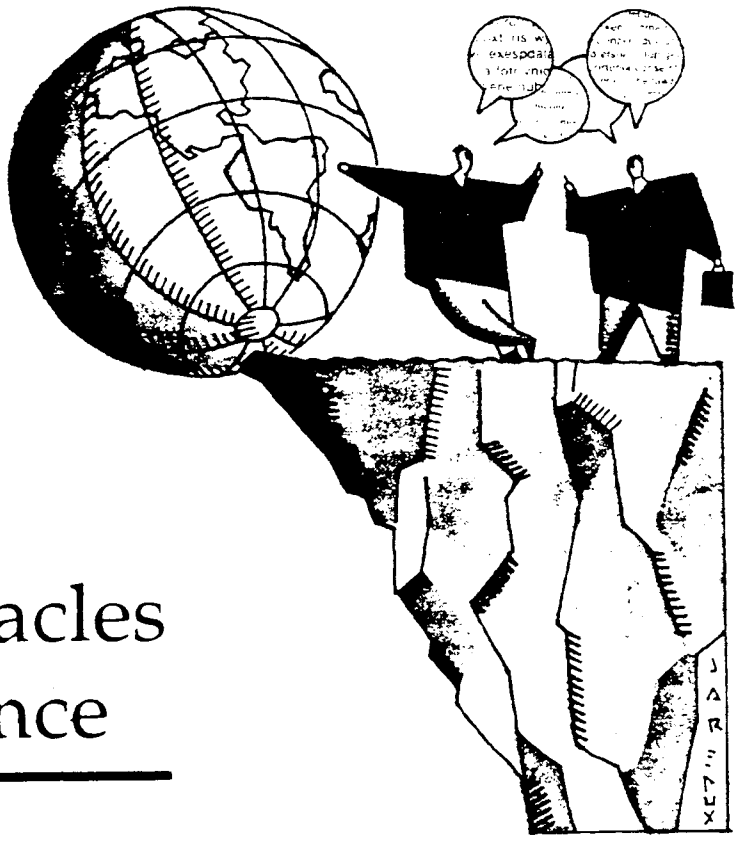


Robin Jareaux

The Need for Miracles in the Age of Science

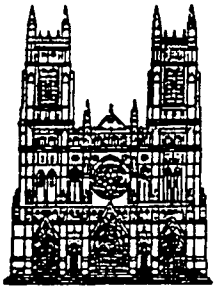
by Timothy C. Weiskel

EARTH DAYS: A SUNDAY SERMON SERIES

A CALL TO FAITH AND ACTION TO SAFEGUARD SACRED EARTH

11:00 am

April 22	Albert Appleton, Commissioner, NYC Department of Environmental Protection
April 29	Gregory Watson, Executive Director, New Alchemy Institute
May 6	Dr. Timothy C. Weiskel, Henry Luce Fellow, Harvard Divinity School and Warren Weaver Fellow, The Rockefeller Foundation
May 13	Hazel Henderson, Author of *Creating Alternative Futures and The Politics of the Solar Age*
May 20	U.S. Senator Albert Gore, Tennessee
May 27	Nancy Jack Todd, Editor, *Annals of Earth* and John Todd, President, Ocean Arks Institute



8:00am	Matins & Holy Communion
9:00am	Holy Communion & Homily
9:30am	Santa Misa en Espanol
10:45am	Pre-School Child Care
11:00am	Religious Education
11:00am	Holy Communion & Sermon
7:00pm	Choral Vespers & Organ Meditation

CATHEDRAL of ST. JOHN the DIVINE

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The Need for Miracles in the Age of Science

by Timothy C. Weiskel

When we anthropologists are at work we usually have our feet in the mud in someone's rice paddy or we are digging up stones and bones to find out what happened—what went wrong—in ancient civilizations and vast empires that collapsed in the dim and distant past.

Ecologists are everywhere telling us in sober tones that we may be facing a similar kind of collapse in our own era. They are saying that rapid and radical changes are required of humankind if we are to survive on this finite planet for very much longer. Many of these changes will demand new forms of personal and collective behavior. Other, far more important changes, will require totally new structures of belief.

What anthropologists are discovering is that although it is certainly difficult to change people's behavior, it is far more difficult to change their fundamental structure of belief.

You might think that we could get help from religious leaders. But, in reality, religious leaders may be part of the problem, not part of the solution. In April 1990, for example, in his homily at St. Patrick's Cathedral, Archbishop John Cardinal O'Connor admonished his parishioners on Earth Day to remember that the celebrations were not primarily about "snails and whales," but about mankind. The *New York Times* reported the next day that he summed up his message in these terms: "The earth exists for the human person and not vice versa."

This statement reflects an unfortunate and embarrassing ignorance of basic principles in evolutionary biology. But, in addition, it reveals a sadly dated theology, one which insists upon putting humankind at the center of all creation. One might think that this kind of anthropocentrism ought by now to be judged theological heresy, for at the very least it presumes that we mortals know the "mind" and intention of God. Yet to my knowledge the archbishop was not denounced by Catholic church officials nor by Protestant clergy for heresy. He was not denounced because anthropocentrism is heavily imbedded as an unquestioned assumption throughout all of the Western Christian tradition.

The sad fact is that the vast majority of spiritual leaders to whom we may turn for help in this time of ecological crisis have their minds furnished with official doctrines and personal convictions that have been the very source of our problem, not a means of possible solution.

But our difficulties do not end here. Misinformed and myopic leadership is not the only problem with our Christian religious tradition. There is something much more fundamental, much more enduring, something at the very core of our religious beliefs that is troublesome in an age of ecological awareness.

This is something not entirely unique to Christianity, for we share it with two other Abramic religions to which we are historically related, Judaism and Islam. Nevertheless, it can be argued that Christians suffer from particularly acute forms of this chronic illusion.

I am referring here to the enduring belief in exceptionalism. Belief in exceptionalism appears in one guise or another from the earliest Hebrew texts right up to the present-day belief in techno-scientific salvationism. Exceptionalism is the belief that whatever tragedy befalls *other* people or the world at large, we—God's "chosen"—will be an exception to that general pattern because of our privileged relation to the divine.

In the Hebrew tradition that exceptionalism is grounded in the notion of the covenant. A crystal clear rendition of this form of exceptionalism—that sense of being set apart from the ordinary—can be found in Nehemiah 9:7-8:

> You, O Lord, are the God who chose Abram, who brought him out from Ur of the Chaldees, and named him Abraham. When you had found his heart faithful in your sight, you made the covenant with him to give to him and his posterity the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites. . .

Nehemiah goes on to recount not just one, but several occasions upon which God was reputed to have suspended natural process and intervened through miraculous acts to divide the seas, shower down

food from the heavens, and make water spring from barren rocks all as a means of fulfilling the alleged covenant with the Hebrews. This sense of being set apart, of being exceptions even to natural process, is fundamental to all Abramic religions. Faith and faithfulness are all that is required to endure the vicissitudes of the natural world.

With Christianity, the focus shifts slightly, particularly in the teachings of Paul. While the claim of being the successors to the Hebrew covenant remains apparent, much more emphasis is placed upon a new concept of confessional belief. One is thought to be set apart from the rest of humanity not so much as an inheritor of an initial covenant, but rather because one has confessed Jesus as the Christ.

Once again, natural process itself is thought to be secondary and subordinate to the central affirmation of faith. How else are we to make sense of the miraculous events recounted in such detail expressly to defy natural process? Faith, we are told, can move mountains, for as it is written, ". . . all things are possible to him that believeth." [Mark 9:23]

Now, many might argue that all this miracle stuff is for the birds. No one believes in these things nowadays. Such quaint beliefs remain comfortably remote from our circumstance. We are, after all, more sophisticated now than they were. Nobody really believes we can make exceptions to natural laws through miracles that express private whim or personal willpower.

Maybe this is so in the realm of personal powers. But have we honestly abandoned exceptionalist belief when it comes to our collective behavior in the ecosystem? I think not.

Actions, of course, speak louder than words, and from the way we act it is clear that we humans still think that natural process and environmental constraints will be suspended just for us because we have a special place in creation, we are set apart, we are truly exceptional beings.

Consider just three forms of exceptionalism that dominate our contemporary belief and behavior concerning the environment. First there is "democratic exceptionalism"; second, there is "humanist exceptionalism"; and third, our entire culture manifests a profound belief in what might best be called "techno-scientific exceptionalism."

Democratic exceptionalism affirms that whatever may befall dictatorial regimes or other misguided peoples throughout the rest of the world, we who have democratic institutions will be exempt because we make decisions on the basis of the will of the people. Our political virtues will save us from collective calamity because people simply won't stand for too much more ecological degradation. People with democratic institutions will simply vote out of office those who engender, condone, or tolerate pollution, and we will be saved from collective destruction.

Humanist exceptionalism draws its inspiring sense of self-confidence more broadly from the Western Renaissance traditions in the arts and letters, and the classical heritage upon which these traditions rest. The argument is that in addition to democratic political institutions, Europeans have been the guardians and progenitors of a unique tradition of humane learning that sets them apart from the mass of humanity. Whatever befalls the "great unwashed heathen," so the reasoning goes, the West's special humanist tradition will guarantee the survival of European and American values. Christianity plays a part in this kind of exceptionalism, but humanist belief is far more comprehensive than any particular creedal formulation. What is at stake is the pervasive assumption that "East is East, but West is best." Thus, it is our Western cultural virtues—perhaps even more than our democratic institutions—that set us off from the mass of mankind and creation as a whole and make us exceptions to the unfortunate patterns of decline and collapse that have afflicted all Eastern civilizations.

Finally, and most widespread in our day, we seem to be wedded to a belief in techno-scientific exceptionalism. Whatever ills befall us or whatever collective disaster seems to threaten creation as a whole, many people now believe that we as humans will be exceptions *thanks to science*. Because of our enlarged brains, it is argued, we humans have developed the power to observe, deduce, reason, theorize, and construct systems of positive science in ways that enable us to "control" our environment. We are no longer constrained by the natural world, so the argument goes; we can stand over and above it as glorious exceptions to its general pattern. We are, as it were, an exception to the laws of nature.

When this background assumption of scientific exceptionalism is combined with technological zeal, some proposals for our ecological salvation take on truly absurd dimensions. There are those who attempt to talk seriously about colonizing space, for example. The idea is to create perfected satellite modules that will mimic earth-like environments for future human habitation. Just how these

techno-boomers will manage to establish sustainable life-support systems in precarious micro-environments when we have failed so miserably to achieve this on the largest inhabitable spaceship in the known universe has not yet been revealed, but this does not seem to trouble the techno-scientific fundamentalists, who find it perfectly possible to believe in space colonization just as they are unquestionably wedded to the notion of a permanent growth economy. Indeed, in the public discourse of our day, space exploration and exploitation is simply an extension of standard economic enterprise to the new "frontiers of space." Techno-scientific fundamentalism, no less than other religious fundamentalisms, tends to engender visions of utopia that, while internally consistent, remain only tangentially linked to daily reality.

In effect, people have watched so many years of "Star Trek" that simple questions about logistic details concerning how more than a handful of selected individuals could survive for more than a few weeks in space are regarded as rude or even unpatriotic. So strong is the faith in scientific exceptionalism that hesitations on these issues are thought to be irreligious or downright blasphemous, for they suggest that human beings are subject to finite limits. The belief that "thanks to science" we have overcome nature or that we will be exceptions to system-wide collapse has become perhaps the biggest single obstacle to devising effective public environmental policy. Public leaders are frequently the worst offenders in this area. The promise of the technological fix is kept alive by politicians who voice the assurance that we can achieve ecological conservation without any sacrifice to our continuously rising standards of living.

In the face of this kind of sustained public fantasy, can we really say that belief in miracles is a thing of the past? I don't think so. In reality, faith in analytical science and manipulative technology has become the dominant form of religiously held belief in the modern world. We think we can tinker with creation as if it were a machine. When things go wrong, we think that still more tinkering will save us. So it's not that we don't believe in miracles. We do. We believe in miracle crops, miracle drugs, miracle diets, Miracle Grow, and Miracle Whip.

The trouble is, that we have come to believe in the wrong kind of miracles. We believe in exceptionalist miracles, ones that set us apart from others and make us exceptions. This kind of belief is much more akin to belief in the golden calf than to belief in the golden rule. We have come to worship our own gadgets and techniques as the means of our salvation. In the process we have forgotten our links to our neighbor, to other life-forms, and to creation itself.

It may be time to rethink our understanding of miracles. In reality, a miracle should not reinforce exceptionalist belief. On the contrary; if it has any meaning at all in our day, a miracle needs to be understood as a life-transforming event that makes us recognize our connectedness with others, reaffirms our sense of community, and empowers us to act in a new manner. The lame are enabled to walk; the blind join the ranks of the seeing; and the sick and infirm are made whole again so that they can be restored to full life with others. These are not exceptionalist miracles; they are *relational miracles*, miracles of connectedness, integration, and common affirmation.

Consider the New Testament text concerning the miracle at Emmaus. As the scripture indicates, the appearance of Christ to his followers was a life-transforming event that enabled them to affirm their connectedness to one another and return in joy to find the other disciples and share their experience.

Now, if the social scientists are right, we humans have about 40 years—until roughly the year 2030—to abandon our exceptionalist beliefs and re-affirm our effective connectedness to other life-forms on the planet. The miracle is not that we are separate from all other creatures, but that we are part of the planet's web of life at all. We are not exceptions to nature; nor should we seek to be. We should instead rejoice that, so far, we are still part of nature's fragile complexity. Henceforth, our technological capability and intelligence should focus upon this simple yet well nigh impossible question: how can we learn to live as responsible citizen creatures in a complex community of life that we did not create and cannot hope to control?

If humans fail to redirect their science and technology to this task—if we fail to respect and preserve this complex community in the next 40 years—we may well become irreversibly committed to a destructive syndrome of social conflict and natural despoliation as each human group in competition with all others struggles to be the longest surviving exception to system-wide collapse.

Indeed, there are ominous signs that we may have considerably less than 40 years to accomplish this if

open warfare accentuates the spiral of ecological decline. Western societies that have achieved historically unprecedented levels of resource and energy consumption are currently spending billions of dollars in military manoeuvres to defend these habitual patterns of resource gluttony in the name of "free access" to diminishing supplies of the planet's remaining non-renewables.

The Cold War may well be over, but warning shots have already been fired in the first of what some observers predict will be a series of expensive and wasteful "resource wars" in the Third World in the coming decades. On August 8th the president of the United States made a televised appeal to the American public, saying, "I ask that in the churches around the country prayers be said for those who are committed to protect and defend America's interests." Within hours Iraq's leadership responded in kind by calling on Muslims to launch a "holy war." Whichever religious tradition claims divine allegiance or ultimate political victory, it now seems clear that because of the nature and scale of the armaments involved the environment itself will be the major victim if these kinds of conflict persist. Along with our assessments of political tyranny and crimes against humanity, we ought now to begin to develop a calculus for crimes against creation, lest we destroy this intricate tissue of life in our blind devotion to various religious, nationalistic, or techno-scientific fundamentalisms.

To avoid the sad fate of accelerated ecological collapse in our age, we need nothing less than a whole series of life-transforming events that enable us to recognize our connectedness to one another and to all other life-forms on this planet. A "me first" or a "we first" attitude will simply not work as a strategy for human survival. It can only serve to hasten our extinction, for, despite the fervor and purity of our beliefs, we will not be exceptions to ecosystemic collapse.

Reversing 2800 years of exceptionalist belief in the next 40 years or sooner is what we need to accomplish. The probability of doing this is not great. Indeed, to scientists the probability seems vanishingly small.

In fact it now seems a matter of near scientific certainty that we need a miracle or two to pull us through—but not exceptionalist miracles by which we might seek foolishly to side-step and override nature's parameters or struggle vainly to separate ourselves from the mass of humanity.

No. We need instead a whole series of plain, old-fashioned *relational miracles* so that—as with those breaking bread in Emmaus—our eyes can be opened, our hearts can burn within us, and we can go forth with joy and conviction to affirm our relation to one another and embrace the creation in our midst and all around us to which we have been blind for so long. ❑

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Timothy Weiskel, Henry Luce Fellow at HDS, has been on leave in 1989-90 at the Rockefeller Foundation in New York.
This article is adapted from a sermon he delivered at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City on May 6, 1990.