

How Can We Give The Earth a Future?

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By Leonardo Boff

Leonardo Boff currently serves as Professor Emeritus of Ethics, Philosophy of Religion and Ecology at the Rio de Janeiro State University. He entered the Franciscan Order in 1959 and was ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1964. Along with Gustavo Gutierrez, he is one of the best known Latin American liberation theologians. However, authorities in the Roman Catholic Church did not appreciate his criticism of Church leadership. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI), silenced him for a year for his book Church: Charism and Power. He was almost silenced again in 1992 by Rome, this time to prevent him from participating in the Eco-92 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, which finally led him to leave the Franciscan religious order and the priestly ministry. He has been honored with various awards, within Brazil and the rest of the world, for his struggles on behalf of the weak, the oppressed and marginalized, and human rights.

Summary: The climate change is now irreversible and will cause devastating catastrophes. Millions of people will disappear in just a few generations. To deal with the crisis threatening the system of life on Earth, we have to look far behind, far ahead and far above. Developing a spiritual vision of the world is the shortest and fastest way to find a solution.

It's an honor for me to give this lecture to open this university's general studies courses. I know many universities in both the East and the West of this world, but in none have I felt such consistency and coherence as I have with this university's general studies program.

In April I will start a semester as a visiting general studies lecturer at the University of Munich, where I studied, but their classes are limited to a semester. Here it's an ongoing program, which leads to the creation of a humanist vision of the world, which is a very important perspective of reality because it means the population will have a greater sense of itself as citizens, of its role in the history being made here and in the challenges thrown up by reality. So I want to recognize this effort the University of Costa Rica is making.

The subject of my talk is "The Humanities in Latin America Today." But I'm going to try to stretch it out a bit, because today Latin America is a small province in the Earth's great complex system. And as we all know, global society is currently in the eye of an immense crisis of civilization, a crisis of meaning in which there is no historical direction. We don't know where we're going and we're caught up in an economic system that absorbs politics and turns everything into merchandise, from sex to the Holy Trinity. Everything can be used to make money and everything is governed by competition rather than cooperation. That's why millions and millions are marginalized and excluded.

Disenchanted and heading for a crisis

I see two transcendental thinkers who can help us understand this historical moment: Max Weber and Friedrich Nietzsche. Both intuited the root of the crisis we're suffering today, but which started much earlier. Weber demonstrated that modern society is built on the functionalist thinking, the bureaucracy and the secularization produced by disenchantment with the world. We live in a state of disenchantment: we're disenchanted with the world, with politics, with our political figures, with Bush, even with Lula.

And last but not least, we're disenchanted with Ronaldinho and Ronaldo, who embarrassed us in the last World Cup. We're living in an era of disenchantment. How can we re-enchant humanity?

Nietzsche brings us another element: the death of God. It's not that God died, because a God who dies isn't a God. Nietzsche tells us that we've killed God. But what does that mean? It means that God has no social relevance, that no cohesion is constructed around the idea of God's transcendence. And because of that we're living in a state of existential helplessness.

Nietzsche's declaration of the death of God has serious consequences because it has meant the disappearance of humanity's utopian horizon. For thousands of years, humanity found a transcendental reference point in religion, a reason for being together, for creating a community and social cohesion. But that doesn't work any more. This doesn't mean that atheism prevails, because atheism isn't the opposite of religion. The opposite of religion is rupture, the lack of a link that binds and rebinds everything. So now we're collectively living broken from within and unprotected.

It is in this context that we must understand the seriousness of the current crisis, which has a very important aggravating factor. Up to now we've been saying we're moving toward a great crisis of civilization. Now we know we're heading toward a crisis of the system of life, of the Earth's system.

Millions will disappear due to the climate change

An incredibly important event, which for me represents a rupture in humanity's collective consciousness, occurred in Paris in early February when the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change, which involves over 2,000 United Nations scientists, presented us with real data on the Earth's situation. They told us that the climate is already undergoing an unstoppable change; that the Earth is going to heat up by between 1.8 and 4 degrees Celsius and in some places up to 6.4 degrees in the coming 30 or 40 years, implying immense devastation to the planet's system of life. Millions of people could disappear.

According to James Lovelock, who formulated the Gaia Theory of the Earth as a living super-organism and has just launched a new book called *Gaia's Revenge*, around 80% of humanity could disappear by 2050 or 2060. This may be an exaggeration, but he does have the authority to say it. When Lovelock visited Brazil in October 2006 he said that while that country has had the privilege of a lot of sun, the sun will now be its misfortune: practically two thirds of the country will be uninhabitable due to excessive heat and there will be an accelerated process of "savannahization" because the Amazon won't be able to withstand such heat levels.

This makes us think that it's not enough just to adapt to the new reality, as the document produced by those scientists suggests. Nor is it enough to reduce the damaging effects of global warming. Something more profound is needed. We need to re-found the meaning of life, to create a new spirituality. In other words, we need a new and greater sense of our purpose in this world, of our coexistence as human beings, to ensure that the world and humanity will continue to have a future. I believe we have to counter despair and disenchantment with motives that make us discover reasons to continue living, with changes and adaptations based on a new paradigm of civilization.

Time for fundamental questions

The essential question is how to get out of this crisis. If it's global, then the solution has to be global as well. And to find it we have to look far behind us, far in front of us and far above us. When we enter into a crisis we ask ourselves the most basic questions, such as who we are, where we come from, where we're going, what our place is among all of Nature's beings and what our mission is in this world. At

moments of crisis, these are the fundamental questions that must be answered individually by each of us and collectively by all human communities and by now globalized humanity. We have to create a kind of minimum viaticum to move ahead and give meaning to our existence under the threats weighing us down.

We're cosmic beings

I want to look a long way behind us. Where do we come from? For me, human beings have at least four roots: cosmic, biological, historical-cultural and personal. We all came from an immense deflagration that happened 13.7 billion years ago. We came from the big bang. At one initial moment we were all together in that minimum point charged with energy and matter that exploded, starting the evolutionary process. That process started expanding, which created the great red stars, within which all the physiochemical elements formed that make up our reality, which is the reality of the whole Universe.

That's why we're cosmic beings, because after the famous isomorphism of the Universe we have the same constituent elements. We're children of that immense process, carrying all of those elements in our skin and bodies. We also carry the four fundamental energies that sustain the Universe and each and every one of us: gravitational, electromagnetic, weak nuclear and strong nuclear. We are cosmic beings and have a cosmic dimension that mustn't be denied. We shouldn't be ashamed about belonging to a reality that inundates us from all sides.

We're living beings humanized through cooperation

We are also living beings. Some 3.8 billion years ago life burst out of an enormously complex evolutionary process. Life is a chapter in the cosmic evolution and human life is one of its sub-chapters, the product of reaching a higher level of complexity. Five or six million years ago our anthropoid ancestors went out to gather and hunt for food. They didn't eat for themselves like most other animals did, but rather brought food back for the group and shared it out in a cooperative way. That gesture of cooperation is a founding feature of humanity. It allowed the jump from animality to humanity. That's why cooperation, solidarity, interdependence isn't law among others; it is the fundamental law of the Universe and of human life. That's what makes capitalism so perverse, putting the whole accent on the individual and on competition rather than cooperation.

As mammals we're affectionate beings

We're living beings. Or put a better way, we're conscious living mammals. Why mammals? Because when mammals emerged 125 million years ago they brought something unique: the birth of affection, caring and love of each mammal for its young. We come from that tradition; we are beings that care, with the kind of sensitivity so lacking in the world today.

When James D. Watson and Francis H. Crick deciphered the genetic code in 1952, they made a unique discovery in the history of science by realizing that all living beings, from the tiniest bacteria to the largest dinosaurs, passing through creatures such as humming birds and arriving at us humans, have basically the same genetic code: the same 20 amino acids and 4 phosphate bases.

This means that all living beings are related, are siblings and cousins, are one great community of life, and we're part of that it. That's what Francis of Assisi intuited in his cosmic mystique when he called the sun brother and the moon sister, when he called birds and even a worm trying to cross the path brothers and sisters. He called them all by the sweet name of brother or sister. He intuited something that for us is now an empirical-scientific fact: we're all brothers and sisters. Human beings have that ancestry, along with all other living beings.

We survive by making culture

We're cosmic and living beings, but we're also cultural-historical beings. All living things except human beings have specialized organs that guarantee their survival and life. We're biologically lacking because we have no specialized organ. In order to survive we have to intervene in nature, to create our habitat, our home. And we're forced to make culture, to make history, to intervene in reality, to create an environment that protects our life and defends our existence. The accumulation of those interventions amounts to culture and history, making us cultural beings.

Evolution was possibly never going to produce that microphone or those electric lights, but through human beings it has produced a culture and technology, without which we wouldn't have the conditions for survival. It has done so in a thousand different ways. That's why there are so many cultures, such diverse human expressions. We can be humans in a thousand different ways: as Latin Americans, Guaranis, Yanomamis, Chinese, Hindu. There are a thousand ways to be present and organize the world, to display the inexhaustible capacity of human capital.

We're unrepeatabe beings

We are cosmic, biological, cultural beings. But we're also beings that contain the ultimate irreducibility, which is our own personal history. Each of us is unrepeatabe in the universe; each is single and unique. That's why in some way the evolutionary process culminates in each male or female human, because we have the capacity to decide, to shape our own future. No matter how many conditioning factors we have and how many pressures we come under from all sides, there's still a deciding point: each person has his or her own singularity, what the great medieval Franciscan philosopher John Duns Scotus called *exeitas*.

All human beings are unrepeatabe, unique in history both past and future. And they also have something sacred because they are each an infinite project whose freedom allows them to give their lives a destiny, be it happy or unhappy, realized or frustrated, from the very moment their individuality, their personality was constituted. And that irreducibility has to be recognized as a philosophical and ontological fact. Each of us is unique. We all have and are responsible for our own destiny. We all have the capacity to exercise our freedom as a decision. And that introduces a new reality into history.

Guaranteeing the Earth a future

If we want to find a way out of the crisis, we have to take this long look backward. We've spent so many millions of years getting where we are. But how's the road ahead? We also have to look a long way forward. And I believe we face four fundamental challenges for the future we will experience.

First, given the crisis and the ecological clamor, we have to ensure the Earth's future because it isn't guaranteed. As the great cosmologist and scientist Carl Sagan said in his testament, the directive forces of the universe can no longer guarantee the Earth's future because we have attacked and exploited it to a point that has exceeded 25% of its regeneration capacity. If we want to guarantee the Earth's future we have to make a political stop, we have to want the Earth to have a future.

And that's what the latest figures from Earth science, from ecology, are asking of us: we have to act, because if we don't do so within a limited space of time we're headed for devastation. We have to incorporate the vision of the Earth transmitted by astronauts looking out the window of their spacecraft: "The Earth is small; it fits in the palm of my hand, I can hide it behind my thumb. And there on that Earth is everything sacred, venerated, loved: my family, my children, my homeland."

We have to incorporate that vision of the Earth as a small planet—the third smallest in the solar system—that revolves around a fifth-category vagabond sun far from the center of our galaxy, within the Orion spiral. Our galaxy is middling, small, among 100 billion other galaxies. And there's our tiny Earth; a pale blue dot. But that's where we are. The whole Universe moved for us to reach this point and talk about these things today. If there had been other changes and other relations we wouldn't be here talking about all of this.

We are the earth that thinks and feels

Astronauts often say that from their spacecraft there's no difference between Earth and humanity; it's all one great unit. That's why we understand that great indigenous Argentine singer Atahualpa Yupanqui who said that earth and human beings are one single reality, the same thing. Human beings are walking Earth, feeling, thinking, loving, caring Earth. And the Earth has now entered into a state of alarm. We are earth. That's why the word "human" comes from the Latin homo-humus, which means fecund, fertile earth. That's why Adam means "son of Adama," mother earth, the good earth.

We're earthly beings. We're the same Earth that at the moment of its evolution began to feel, love, think. That's why we can't deny our earthly roots. And this Earth could succumb as the result of human beings' systematic irresponsibility. For the past 300 years our civilization has been proposing the insanity of systematically and continuously exploiting all of the Earth's resources—the soil, the subsoil, the air... This Earth can no longer resist; it's under incredible stress. And we have to guarantee the Earth's future.

As educator Ángel Ocampo said, "We must care for the Earth because it belongs to our children, to our grandchildren." We are Earth's guests and for the love of those who have still not been born we must learn to love the invisible, to respect and care for the Earth because they have the right to inhabit it, for it to be inhabitable, for there to be enough for everyone, to have breathable air, to be able to tread uncontaminated soils.

Our great challenge is how to guarantee the future of the Earth's system. And we're not just talking about the future of Costa Rica or Latin America, but all of it, because we're provinces and Costa Rica is a beautiful, radiant province of this great planet Earth.

For humanity to survive

A second challenge looking far forward is to guarantee the survival of humanity. And that's no small task, because in our dementia we've constructed a death machine; we have biological, chemical and nuclear weapons that could destroy the whole of humanity in 25 different ways without leaving a single survivor. That's what human beings have created. The following figures recently appeared in *Le Monde Diplomatique*: 70% of the world's intelligence is involved in military projects, in projects of war. Only a humanity gone mad, only universities without the kind of general, humanist studies this university offers could reach such an expression of dementia as feeding the death machine.

During one of the human rights conferences I participated in with Michael Gorbachov, he said that more weapons of death are built and sold today than during the Cold War. Arms construction demands enormous capital investments and cutting edge scientific research. It's the biggest world market together with the drugs market.

We have to guarantee humanity's survival, which is not guaranteed. We have to counter the culture of war with a culture of peace. We have to counter military heroes with heroes of peace, of love for humanity, people who have served the good causes of humanity.

Becoming a single human family

Our third challenge looking far ahead is to ensure the unity of the human family, because the great risk today is that it will bifurcate. On one side will be those with access to all the means of life, who can possibly live to be 130, the age of our cells. This is only possible for 1.6 million people. But it happens that there are 6.5 billion of us. The rest of humanity dies at 50 or 60 years of age, or here in Costa Rica, where people live for over 70 years. I'd be dead in Brazil where average life expectancy is 64 years, because I'm 68. My use-by date would already be expired.

How can we maintain the unity, keeping human life from bifurcating? The ideals of equality and union are very weak in the history of humanity, which has been marked by confrontation and war. The great risk is that we'll no longer consider ourselves as fellow humans, viewing others as unequal, different, another non-human species. That's how the Serbs castrated the Muslims of Yugoslavia. That's how we can torture and kill without offending the Human Rights Charter: because they're "not human." So many people think that way now.

We should remember US philosopher Richard Rorty, who wrote a beautiful article about how the degradation of culture not only makes us different but also treats us as unequal, as another non-human species. How can we keep the human family seated around the same table, at home enjoying the generosity of nature, like brothers and sisters?

So that all cultures express themselves

The fourth challenge is how to guarantee the singularity, the identity of Latin America, of Costa Rica. On the cultural level, the globalization process "hamburgerizes" the world, standardizing habits, music and world views. It would be terrible if nature consisted only of cockroaches or scorpions. Biodiversity is hugely important. The more trees, birds or fish the better, because the interdependence of all species gives them all a future, allowing them to survive.

We have to defend biodiversity. Globalization is a new stage, humanity's planetary stage. In this stage, peoples who were lost far away in their own regions find themselves together, in a single place where the planet Earth is their common home. And they bring with them the wealth of their historical experiences, their national identities, their spiritual experiences, their culture, their music. All of this reveals unsuspected wealth. How can we make human capital greater? Because human capital still hasn't been fully developed; it's inexhaustible, infinite because we are an infinite project.

For Latin American biodiversity

I believe that the immense civilizing experiment of historical magnitude we've created here in Latin American must be preserved and offered to humanity. Representatives of 60 different ethnic groups, nations and peoples came to my country alone, and it was a similar story for each Latin American country. Immigrants from all over the world came here and have become a part of our peoples. How can we protect this successful civilizing experiment in which, with some exceptions, we live together in diversity, accepting one another?

Pacha Mama, Mother Earth, was very generous on our continent, which has the greatest biodiversity on the planet. It's a fantastic explosion of the mystery of life; the Amazon has more animal and vegetable species within a space about as big as a soccer field than the whole of Europe. Here in Latin America we also have the greatest superabundance of fresh water, which will soon be the scarcest of nature's goods; we have over 24% of the world's fresh water available for human consumption.

The Latin American countries that include the Amazon rainforests regulate the whole planet's climate. In ecological terms, humanity's future depends on Latin America and we have the immense responsibility of caring for those green forest lands. But we're also the most unequal continent on Earth, even more so than Africa, which may be poorer but has greater equality.

We have to rescue our past, the great wisdom of our native peoples, the Aztecs, Incas, Mayas, Quechuas, Miskitus and all the many other cultures here, whose ecological knowledge must be preserved and continually reviewed. We have to move beyond the present, with all its inequalities, and prepare the future so that Latin America can offer what it has, not only for its own benefit but also that of humanity.

We're spiritual beings who have to look up

I'm reaching the end now... We need to look a long way up. We've looked backward and forward and now we must look up, which is the other dimension of human beings. I believe we have to develop a spiritual vision of the world as the shortest, most immediate way of finding a solution. When I talk about finding a spiritual vision of the world I'm not talking about a religious vision. Religions don't have the monopoly on spirituality; it is a dimension of the quality of being human. We have a body and are part of the cosmos. We have a psyche that is part of the whole inner life of all living beings. But we also have a spirit, which is that moment of consciousness in which we feel part of a whole that flows in and out of us on all sides.

Through the spirit we grasp that things are not placed side by side, in linear fashion, but rather everything forms an immense system, an ordered cosmos; all things are bound and re-bound by a velum; the universe has a message for us in the majesty of the stars and the grandeur of complexity; all things have their other side, another dimension that speaks to us; and human beings can listen, decipher reality's messages, listen to our own hearts and the calls for generosity, compassion, love and caring for everything that lives and exists, because everything that exists deserves to exist and everything that lives deserves to live.

That dimension of spirituality underlies all possible paradigmatic initiatives and alternatives of this civilization that has brought us to this world crisis. Looking up allows us a new perception of being, of the ultimate reality and of human beings, who bear that reality.

We need spirituality

In the words of the great 20th-century theologian Karl Rahner, this new century, the 21st, will either be one of spirituality or it won't be at all. We're talking about spirituality in that profound sense of a human being capable of living, accepting, elaborating values of gratuity, love, friendship and compassion toward those who suffer, and of caring for the Earth, and for our life and our future.

I'd like to finish with a quote from one of the Judaeo-Christian scriptures. At one point God says, "'I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.'" (Deuteronomy 30:19-20). We've chosen life. And I'm sure all of you have as well.