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CHANGING THE RELIGIOUS CLIMATE: THE EMERGING ENVIRONMENTAL SPIRITUALITY

RELIGION, ECOLOGY, AND NATURE? WHAT IS THE CONNECTION?

> A view of nature can be seen as a projection of human perception of self and society onto the cosmos. Conversely, theories about nature have historically been interpreted as containing implications about the way individuals or social groups behave or ought to behave. [1] (Carolyn Merchant)

> Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. We must rethink and re-feel our nature and destiny. The profoundly religious, but heretical, sense of the primitive Franciscans for the spritual autonomy of all parts of nature may point a direction. I propose Francis as patron saint for ecologists. (Lynne White, "The Historical Roots" in Science).

When you think of "religion" what is it that you are thinking of? Most people think of institutions, rituals, songs, buildings, scriptures, and practices. The root of the term "re-legere" (to read again) and/or "re-ligare" (to collect and tie back), suggests that religion, whaterver else it is, is something that performs a connective function in human life. Whether it helps us read life into the world or whether it helps us collect information together and bind it into some sort of encompassing meaning, religion at its best is about connecting our lives (human and other) into meaningful wholes. I, along with others such as Martin Heidegger, also suggest that whatever it means to be human, a part of that definition should include human's as meaning-making creatures.[2] I would also add to this definition of religion the Durkheim insight that religion functions.[3] That is, religion, whether we as individuals agree with it or not, shapes the institutions and worlds around us. It shapes our politics, our government, and our economic lives. Furthermore, religion ought also shapes our cultures and societies, but the environment.

That is, religion is also environmental history: each religion is shpaed by the rest of the natural world and shapes that world in return. Religion *matters* in and to the world.[4] Finally, religion is through and through a western construct. Many eastern and indigenous traditions identified as "religion" are more rightly seen as practices, life-ways, or philosophies of life.

What comes to mind when you think of 'ecology'? The etymology of ecology simply means, in the greek "words" (logos) about the "house" (oikos). This implies that what we are talking about when we are talking about ecology are household isues: home economics. Embedded in this understanding is that we live in the Earth that is our home.[5] Ecology as a science is also about the material and energy flows within and between systems. That is, it is not about mere equilibrium, but also includes evolution and entropy. Ecology is not a science about stasis, but a science about changing relationships between organisms, energies, and materials. As a science, ecology relies on the interpretation of data received through field work and in the laboratory. Thus, it also must include philosophy of science and reflection on the location of ecologists in relationship to their work.[6] Finally, ecology must be thought of in the plural, as ecologies. There is not one Global ecology, but many planetary ecologies: one size does not fit all here.

In concluding this etymological introduction to the triad of terms I will be exploring here, I end with reflection on "nature." For most people, even still today, these words conure up a non-human space: a space free of technology and the presence of human beings. This space has been called both "wilderness" and "wasteland" in most Western traditions.[7] Nature has its etymological roots in the latin *natura*: "course of things, the universe" and *nasci* or "birth." Thus nature is more a principle of life than any thing. It is the creative energy that allows life to live. Here I am thinking of nature as what Spinoza calls, *natura naturans* or nature naturing.[8] As a

general principle of newness and life, nature is my all inclusive term. It includes humans, cultures, sciences, religions, as well as mountains, streams, oceans, atmosphere, stars, atoms, and the entire universe. Nature expresses itself at multiple levels of life and none can be reduced to the other. Finally, nature includes death: life needs life in order to live and death cannot be excluded from the process of birth.

In summary, taking "religion" and "ecology" together, then, implies that we are trying to connect life together into a single home and make sense out of the ongoing process of nature. This is, indeed, different from the way in which environmentalism and religious traditions have proceeded up until the last half of the 20th Century. On the one hand, Western environmentalism emerging around the dawn of the 20th century (with roots in the Romantics) was about preservation and conservation. It was about removing human presence from raw nature so that we could reap the benefits of this "raw nature" in perpetuity. On the other hand, many religions, I am thinking especially here of Western Christianity, proceeded in the world as if we as human beings were not native to the planet. Rather, our true home was in some transcendent space beyond the here and now and this life was a step along the way to that true home. In other words, both religion and ecology perpetuated the idea that humans are somehow separate from the natural world: ecology by defining nature without humans and religion by defining humans without nature.

In what follows, I argue that the dialogue between religion and ecology have precedents in the general dialogue between religion and science: specifically cosmological and evolutionary sciences. The past interactions between western religions and these sciences were not mere instances of conflict as is often assumed. Rather, they were instances of religion and science in dialogue over the meaning of nature. Similar to the challenges of meaning brought about by

Copernicus, Newton, and Darwin, Global Climate Change posits challenges to meaning and hope for the future. At heart, theses issues are religious and the dialogue between religion and ecology will be crucial for re-interpreting our place in the world and making nature meaningful. I first analyze the dialogical nature of religion and science drawing off of the cosmological and evolutionary "debates." Then, I move into a discussion of how Global Climate Change changes our understanding of what "religion" is. Finally, I move on to discuss how the emerging dialogue between "religion and ecology" will help us to re-locate meaning and value on the planet Earth.

THE DIALOGICAL METHOD OF RELIGION AND SCIENCE: MOVING BEYOND CONFLICT MODELS

Of the many different methods and models used to relate "religion" and "science,"[9] listening to the media one might assume that the conflict model or the two-worlds model are the dominant options. The conflict model is best captured in the rhetorical debates surrounding Darwinian Evolution. The idea is that there can only be one right option: Creationists argue that Genesis is scientific; Intelligent Design theoriests argue that science suggests (if not proves) that there is a creator God; and Materialists or Reductionists argue that evolution explains all of life: there is no God. The two-worlds theorists argue that science and religion deal with different areas of reality and these two areas just don't meet in the middle. Sometimes it is argued that "science" talks about facts, and "religion" talks about value: in other words, religion and science deal with two languages.[10]

In both of these models, "conflict" and "two-worlds," it is assumed that there is a rift between religion and science, that a cut can be made to sanction off one are of study from the other. In this section, I want to argue that this understanding of religion and science is very much

the product of "western" thought about the natural world and will discuss specifically here the Christian western aspects of this line of thining. I argue that in other cultures this "religion" and "science" split does not really occur. Rather, what we might call religious and scientific reflections are in dialogue about the nature of which they are both a part. That is, objects and subjects, facts and values, material and ideas, are still associated into some sort of integrated understanding of a living, natural world of which we are a aprt. This was also the case in what has become "western" culture up until the "scientific revolution:" namely, scientific and religious aspects of reality were unified in a common understanding of a living nature: the cosmos. I am not suggesting that other cultures nor midieval western cultures were or are any better off in terms of environmental attitudes, but merely that nature was not split in the way that now leads to conflicts between what we call "science" and "religion."

In order to belabor this point, I want to look at the transition of Ptolemaic/Aristotelian Cosmology to that of Gallilean/ Copernicun. In other words, I want to examine the move from a geo-centric earth to that of a heliocentric and then a non-centric universe. This is important, becase these transitions in human imagination provide examples for how we might addreess our contemporary transition brought about by global climate change.

FROM GEO-CENTRISM TO HELIOCENTRISM AND BEYOND

Often when people think of the "Copernican Revolution" or of Galileo, images of modern scientific thinkers battling a dogmatic Church are conjured. That is, it is often assumed that the shift in our thinking about the cosmos from a geo-centric, to a helio-centric, and then to a non-centric or infinite universe, is an instance of conflict between "religion and science." However, I along with others argue that this is an anacrhonistic way of understanding what was taking place.

If there were any conflicts in these paradigm shifts they were conflicts between sciene and science and the subsequent transformation of meaning that took place as a result of these new world-views. In other words, Galileo, Copernicus, and later Bruno challenged the Aristotelean Cosmos that put earth at the center of the universe and humans at the center of an eternal, omni-God's concern. This model of the universe was the model through which 1500 years of Chrisitian religious reflection was done. That is, it was the assumed "science" of reality at the time. When Galileo and Copernicus challgenged this through their observatins suggesting that the sun was at the center of the universe, the challenge was to the reigning Aristotelian cosmology. Bruno then challenged this further by suggesting that the sun is not even central, nor is our solar system. Again, these were challenges to some 1500 year-old ways of thinking about the universe, and about human place and significance therein. It led to a crisis in religious thinking because prior religious thinking was always-already informed by the science of that time. In other words, there had already been some 1500 years of dialogue between Aristotelian Science and Christian thought in the west. When the science began to challenge and pick apart the coherent understanding of nature, this also led to a crisis in meaning and value: what does it mean that human beings are not the center of the Earth and Universe? Is life just meaningless?

Darwins challenge was much the same. He challenged Aristotelian biology and this led to a further crisis in human understanding, one which still plays out in some not so helpful ways in our culture wars today. What I want to suggest is that similar to these paradigm shifts, the challenges of Global Climate Change are changing the religious-meaning-making methods that we share as human beings. In other words, our understandings of meaning and value are once again deconstructed: this time through a changing climate. The task before us then is to re-imagine ourselves in the context of the planet in ways that are meaning-full. Luckily, this work

is already being done.

THE EMERGING DIALOUGE OF RELIGION AND ECOLOGY

I see at least two primary ways in which the religious climate is changing in response to planetary climate changes: the first is the movement I will call "religion and ecology," and the second is one I refer to as "religious naturalism." Both of these movements would not be possible without many events during the 19th/20th centuries including: 1) The rapid industrial revolution following on the heals of the scientific revolution and the Reformation; 2) The early "environmental" movements in the 20th century in response to Industrial malaise represented by people such as John Muir; 3) The emergence of sciences such as evoution, ecology, and post-substantial physics that all suggest human beings are deeply rooted in the ongoing processes of life on earth; 4) The Apollo 8 image of Earth from outer-space, which pervades our concious understanding of the world as "One World;" 5) Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and the awareness of how human technologies effect other life-processes on earth; 6) The crisis at Love Canal and subsequent Environmental Justice movement which reinforces the understanding that social justice and ecological well-being are two-sides of the same coin; 7) The Manhattan Project, the Ozone Hole, and awareness of Global Climate Change which all suggest that we as members of this planetary community can actualy change the course of ongoig life on the planet. In other words, there is a social and ecological context out of which "religion and ecology" and "religious naturalism" emerge. Since this is a specific context, I want to argue that there are specific things that we must address in response to Global Climate Change.

First, this is a new problem that humans have never had to deal with. No extant philsophy, ethic or religious tradition was formulated at a time when global climate change was a

concern.

Second, this is a problem of meaning: what does it mean to hope, value, and make meaning in a world that is both changing through climate change and interrelated through processes of globalization? Again, meaning has shifted from a Universal-thing where there is one meaning for the whole universe, to a very local-thing: many meanings, many paths, all socially and ecologically located. In part, this shift is really acknowledging the context of our thinking. In other words, universal thinking has always been just as located as contextual thinking. However, 2000 years ago, before mass communication, before a time when people traveled a lot, at a time in "the west" when our universe was small and we were at the center of it, all of this made it easier to assume that my idea, my God, my Meaning was Universal or The Meaning / The Way. Now, however, we live in a world that has become global and we know that there are many different ways of making sese and meaning out of the world. In response to this, the ways in which we construct religious meaning has to get "grounded": grounded in particular places and spaces.

Third, global climate change forces nature to be political. In a world where "nature" will be changing and in a world where we are a part of the rest of the natural world, we as human, meaning-making creatures have to dialogue with the rest of the natural world about what types of future-natures we might want to live in. There is no longer a possibility of "return" to some pure nature, nor is there hope in the idea that we will technologically espcape nature, rather we must begin to dialouge about what "natures" we want to co-construct. [11] Rather than just assuming that there is some universal "Natural" way, our science practitioners need to become spokespersons for nature: for different animals, rivers, ecosystems, genes, atoms, atmosphere, etc. In other words, sceintists become what some have called "spokespersons" for the "voices" of nature in

the ongoing political processes of deciding how we should live together on a single planet.[12] Having said that, I now turn to the discussion of "religion and ecology" and "religious naturalism," two areas of thought that are grounding human beings and our meanings within the planetary community.

Without getting into the whole history of "religion and ecology," I will say that as a field it is relatively new. The Forum on Religion and Ecology, the founding organization of the field, began their work in the 1990s. There was, of course, some serious reflection prior to that, but nothing as systematic as the Forum on Religion and Ecology. The idea behind "religion and ecology" is, as Mary Evelyn Tucker one of the co-founders of the Forum, that religions are now entering their "ecological phase."[13] Thus, the Forum and the broader "religion and ecology" dialogue has primarily environmentally assessed extant world religious traditions: Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Shinto, Indigenous Traditions, Buddhism, Taoism, Jainism, Confucianism, and Hinduism. In this process thinkers and practitioners from within these religious traditions reflect on what has been ecologically destructive and what might be ecologically healing within the tradition. This has led to a lot of reflection not only in the academy, but also in public policy, in religious communities, and in government institutions about how religious peoples might be moblizled to help address the issue of climate change. One project, for instance, is Interfaith Power and Light. This is an organization that helps religious communities green their temples, churches, and mosques. They do everything from energy audits to putting solar panels on the roofs of buildings. All of this is done from an understanding that humans must be better care-takers of God's creation. Many other examples exist such as the Evangelical Enviromental Network, the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, the Green Sangha, and the Green Yoga organization. This emergence of an ecological sensibility within extant religious traditions

has the advantage of addressing specific communities that are already in existence. It has the built in benefit of affecting the many peoples that associate with one of the extant world religions. Yet, the question remains as to whether or not extant traditions can be modified enough to address the changes brought about by global climate change. Luckily, there is also another emergent meaning-making system: religious naturalism.

I am using the phrase "religious naturalism" in its broadest sense here. There are many forms of it, but all abide to some sort of understanding that meaning is located within the rest of the natural world. In other words, science and the practice of science can foster a spirituality. Some have taken the big-bang story from cosmology and developed it into a "universe story" that places humans within the meaning-ful process of 15 plus billion years of cosmic evolution.[14] Others have studied evolution and suggested that the very science is enough to produce awe and wonder. Further, some argue that these "sacred depths of nature" are the grounds out of which consciousness and meaning-making abilities emerge.[15] Still others see James Lovelock's understanding of the Earth-systems of land, water and air as an interactive living organism that he refers to as Gaia, as the grounds for Gaiain spiritualities.[16] And others see the practice of environmental restoration or healing the earth as a form of "environmental spirituality" in itself.[17] At the heart of all of these approaches are emerging sensibilities that address the specific problems of contemporary environmental crises. In other words, they are very focused and contextual and may be able to do a better job of meaning-making and motivating than trying to adapt a 2000 plus year-old tradition. However, the downside is that they are new, unorganized, and don't have near the following of extant "world religions."

Both "religion and ecology" and "religious naturalism" are relevant in addressing the many issues that we will confront in the face of global climate change. I think they are

inherenlty interdisciplinary, dialogical, and open processes that are helping us to re-think ourselves back into the planet. This is a shift in our thinking that will require a lot of self-reflection, ongoing dialogue, and changes in behaviors. The task is nothing less than changing our meaning-systems from those based upon "global" understandings to those based upon "planetary" understandings.[18] This move entails seeing ourselves as planetary out-growths rather than global managers. In other words, it involves re-imagining humans as but one among many in the ongoing life of nature naturing. As this ongoing life is open and evolving, we will need local meanings, local values, and local hopes as we address the ongoing challenges brought about by global climate change.

ENDNOTES

[1] Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1980; reprint, San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1990), 69.
[2] See his discussion of "historicity" and "thrown-ness" in Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by Joan Stambaugh (Albaby, NY: SUNY Press, 1996 edition). Historicity is the nature of Da-Sein and we always, already exist in this "historicity." This "historicity" is the meaning-making structure of Da-Sein.
[3] See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, translated by Karen Fields (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1995), esp, p 44: "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and praticies *which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them*."
[4] On the "Environmental History" of Religion, see: Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003); and Clarence Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western thought From Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990ed).
[5] See Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000), where she develops the metaphor of housekeeping as an environmental ethic more fully.
[6] Feminist philosophers of science have done the lion-share of work surrounding the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity / value and fact in science. See, eg: Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women's Lives* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1991), esp. 138-163.
[7] There is a lot of literature on the "western" understanding of nature as "wilderness" and the problems that concept entails. See, eg: Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*(New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982 ed.); and J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson, eds. *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1998).
[8] Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics* (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2005 ed.).
[9] See, eg. Ian Barbour's classic, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues* (New York, NY: Harper, 1997).
[10] Langdon Gilkey was one proponent of the "two-worlds" view as would have been someone like Karl Barth. See, Langdon Gilkey, *Nature, Reality and the Sacred* (Mineapollis, MN: Fortress, 2000).

[11] Bruno Latour describes well the need for nature to become political and imagines life as a living, on-going "collective" in his book, *The Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
[12] Ibid.
[13] She talks about this in her book, *Worldly Wonder: Religions Enter their Ecological Phase* (Peru, IL: Open Court Press, 2003). It is language taken from Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, *The Universe Story: From the Cosmic Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1994).
[14] Again, see Berry and Swimme, *The Universe Stor*y.
[15] See here Urusla Goodenough, *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000); See also on "emergence", Terrence Deacon, *The Symbolic Species: The CoEvolution of Language and the Brain* (New York, NY: WW Norton, 1998).
[16] James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000 ed).
[17] William Jordan, *The Sunflower Forest: Ecological Restoration and the New Communion with Nature* (Berkeley, CA: University of CA Berkeley Press, 2003).
[18] Gayatri Spivak, *The Death of a Discipline* (New York, NY: Columbia Press, 2005).